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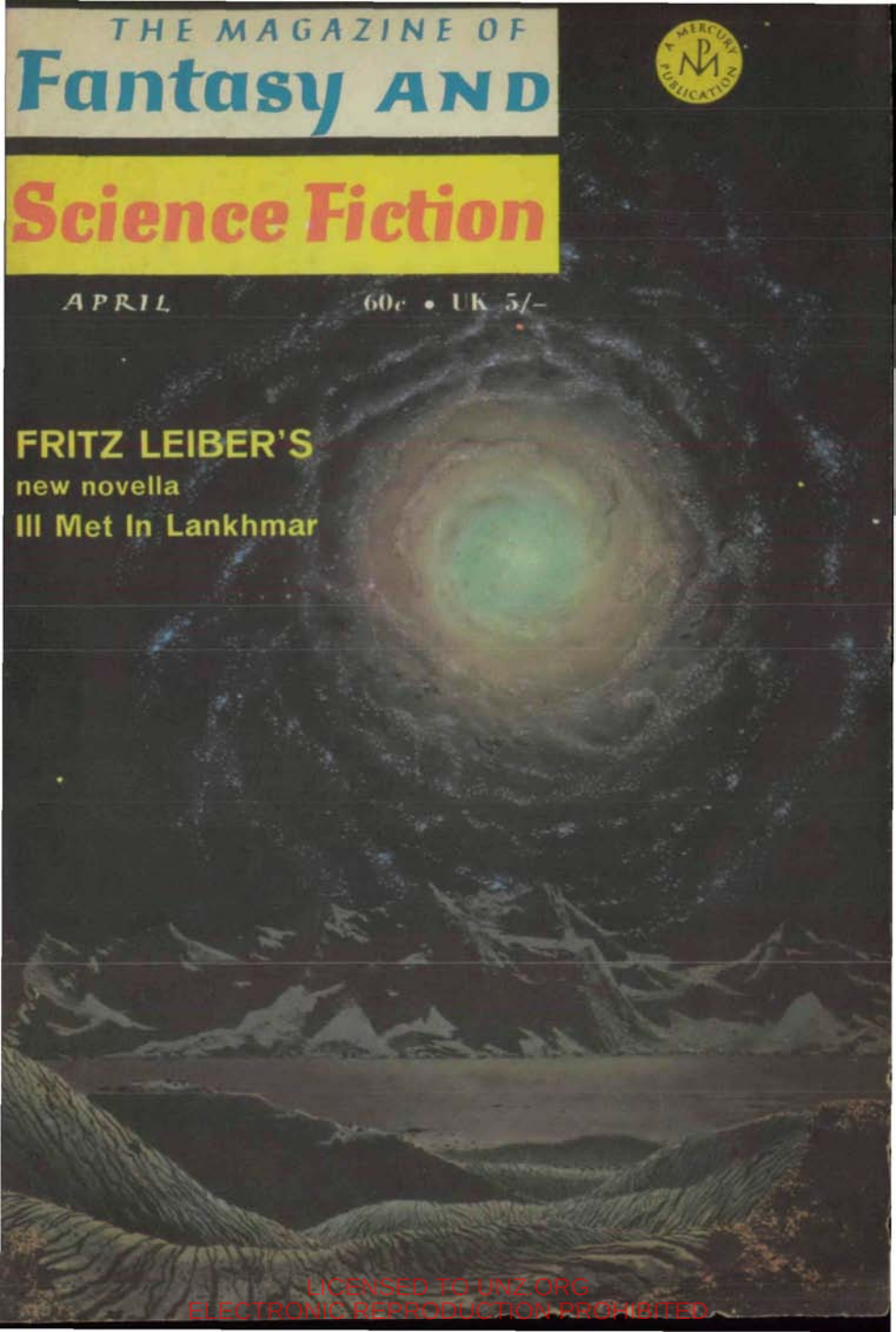

FRITZ LEIBER'S
new novella
Ill Met In Lankhmar

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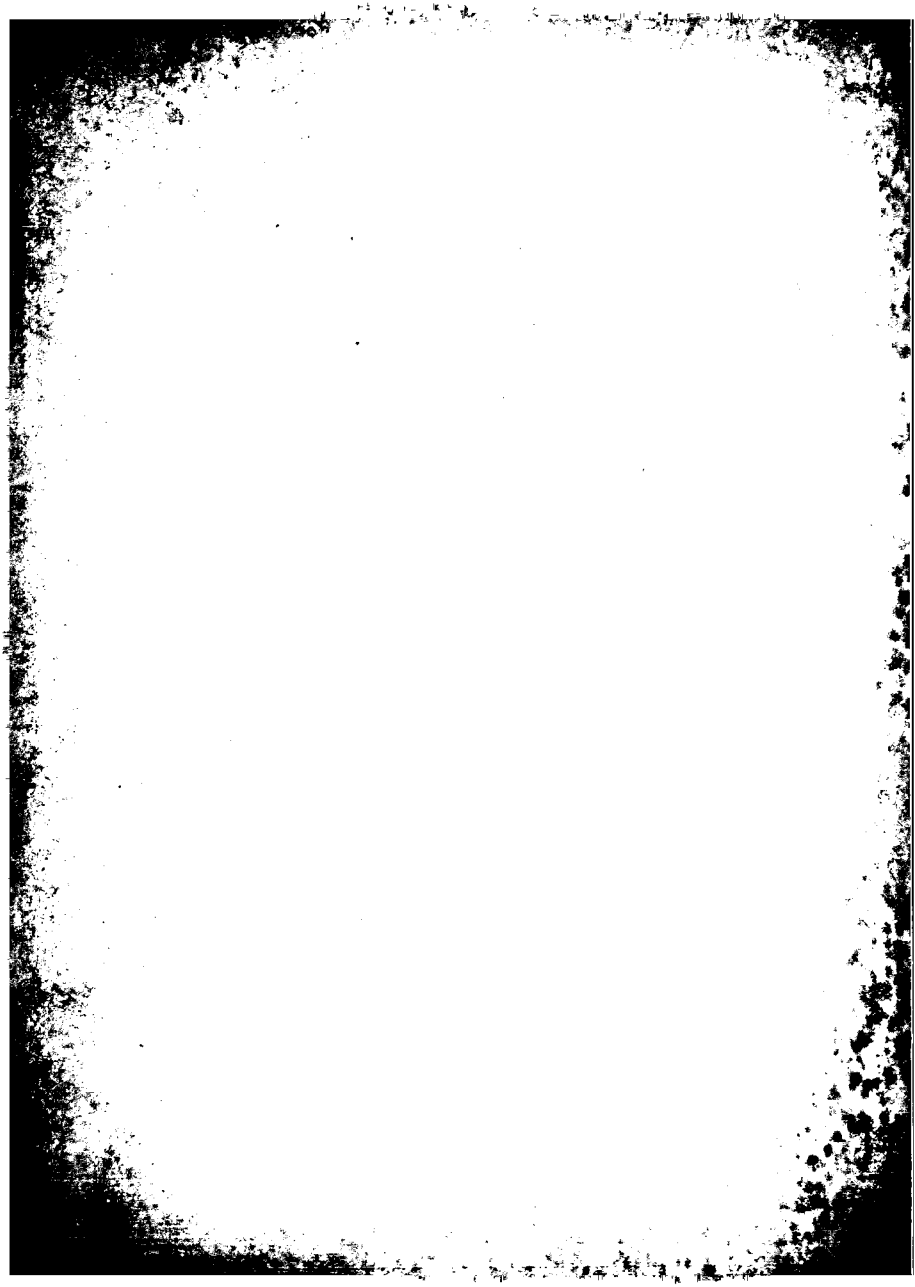

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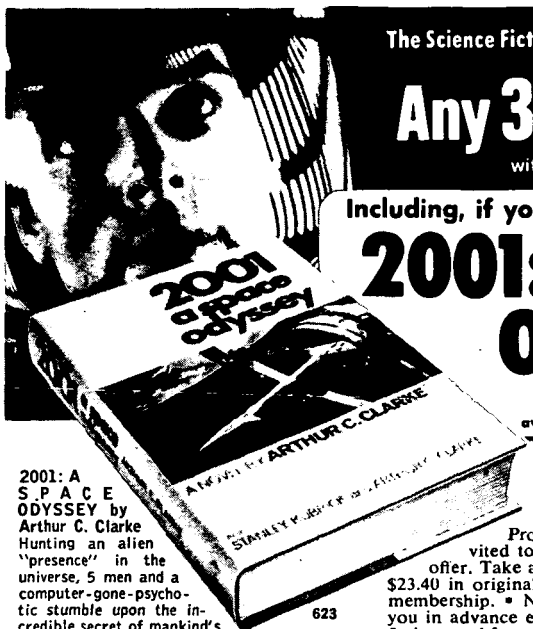

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

APRIL • 21ST YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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Many of our readers are probably familiar with Fritz Leiber's extraordinary stories about the adventures of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser (published mostly in Unknown *and* Fantastic*). This latest story is the ideal introduction for those new to the series. The author tells why:*

"A little more than 30 years ago I recorded the first adventure of the thief the Gray Mouser and the barbarian Fafhrd near the huge and ancient city of Lankhmar in what I later discovered to be the world of Nehwon. That story was published in the August 1939 issue of the magazine Unknown *as "Two Sought Adventure" and later retitled "The Jewels in the Forest." In it, the Mouser and Fafhrd were already close-knit comrades of long standing.*

At irregular intervals over the years I set down many more of their exploits—some 20, about—even including a tale concerning the youth of each before they met. But—only a little at first, then more and more—I became haunted by the question of how these two dissimilar men ever did come to meet in the first place and form such a particularly deep friendship, with great empathy for each other and unshakeable mutual loyalty.

I sensed that some crucial adventure was involved, and I was fairly sure that it had taken place in Lankhmar on a dark and misty night, but otherwise my vision was clouded. Recently the clouds lifted and I was able to tell, with pricklings of horror and the unshed tears of sheer tragedy, but with laughter too, the tale I have titled, 'Ill Met in Lankhmar.'"—FRITZ LEIBER, Oct. 1969

ILL MET IN LANKHMAR

by Fritz Leiber

SILENT AS SPECTERS, THE TALL and the fat thief edged past the dead, noose-strangled watch-leopard, out the thick, lock-picked door of Jengao the Gem Merchant, and strolled east on Cash Street through the thin black night-smog of Lankhmar.

East on Cash it had to be, for west at Cash and Silver was a police post with unbribed guardsmen restlessly grounding and rattling their pikes.

But tall, tight-lipped Slevyas, master thief candidate, and fat, darting-eyed Fissif, thief second class, with a rating of talented in double-dealing, were not in the

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least worried. Everything was proceeding according to plan. Each carried thonged in his pouch a smaller pouch of jewels of the first water only, for Jengao, now breathing stentoriously inside and senseless from the slugging he'd suffered, must be allowed, nay, nursed and encouraged to build up his business again and so ripen it for another plucking. Almost the first law of the Thieves' Guild was never to kill the hen that laid eggs with a ruby in the yolk.

The two thieves also had the relief of knowing that they were going straight home now, not to a wife, Arath forbid!—or to parents and children, all gods forfend!—but to Thieves' House, headquarters and barracks of the almighty Guild, which was father to them both and mother too, though no woman was allowed inside its ever-open portal on Cheap Street.

In addition there was the comforting knowledge that although each was armed only with his regulation silver-hilted thief's knife, they were nevertheless most strongly convoyed by three reliable and lethal bravoes hired for the evening from the Slayers' Brotherhood, one moving well ahead of them as point, the other two well behind as rear guard and chief striking force.

And if all that were not enough to make Slevyas and Fissif feel safe and serene, there danced along soundlessly beside them in the shadow of the north curb a small, malformed or at any rate somewhat large-headed shape that might have been a very small dog, a somewhat undersized cat, or a very big rat.

True, this last guard was not an absolutely unalloyed reassurance. Fissif strained upward to whisper softly in Slevyas' long-lobed ear, "Damned if I like being dogged by that familiar of Hristomilo, no matter what security he's supposed to afford us. Bad enough that Krovas did employ or let himself be cowed into employing a sorcerer of most dubious, if dire, reputation and aspect, but that—"

"Shut your trap!" Slevyas hissed still more softly.

Fissif obeyed with a shrug and employed himself in darting his gaze this way and that, but chiefly ahead.

Some distance in that direction, in fact just short of Gold Street, Cash was bridged by an enclosed second-story passageway connecting the two buildings which made up the premises of the famous stone-masons and sculptors Rokkermas and Slaarg. The firm's buildings themselves were fronted by very shallow porticoes supported by unnecessarily large pillars of varied shape and decoration, advertisements more than structural members.

From just beyond the bridge came two low, brief whistles, a

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signal from the point bravo that he had inspected that area for ambushes and discovered nothing suspicious and that Gold Street was clear.

Fissif was by no means entirely satisfied by the safety signal. To tell the truth, the fat thief rather enjoyed being apprehensive and even fearful, at least up to a point. So he scanned most closely through the thin, sooty smog the frontages and overhangs of Rokkermas and Slaarg.

On this side the bridge was pierced by four small windows, between which were three large niches in which stood—another advertisement—three life-size plaster statues, somewhat eroded by years of weather and dyed varyingly tones of dark gray by as many years of smog. Approaching Jengao's before the burglary, Fissif had noted them. Now it seemed to him that the statue to the right had indefinably changed. It was that of a man of medium height wearing cloak and hood, who gazed down with crossed arms and brooding aspect. No, not indefinably quite—the statue was a more uniform dark gray now, he fancied, cloak, hood, and face; it seemed somewhat sharper featured, less eroded; and he would almost swear it had grown shorter!

Just below the niches, moreover, there was a scattering of gray and raw white rubble which he didn't recall having been there earlier. He strained to remember if during the excitement of the burglary, the unsleeping watch-corner of his mind had recorded a distant crash, and now he believed it had. His quick imagination pictured the possibility of a hole behind each statue, through which it might be given a strong push and so tumbled onto passers-by, himself and Slevyas specifically, the right-hand statue having been crashed to test the device and then replaced with a near twin.

He would keep close watch on all the statues as he and Slevyas walked under. It would be easy to dodge if he saw one start to overbalance. Should he yank Slevyas out of harm's way when that happened? It was something to think about.

His restless attention fixed next on the porticoes and pillars. The latter, thick and almost three yards tall, were placed at irregular intervals as well as being irregularly shaped and fluted, for Rokkermas and Slaarg were most modern and emphasized the unfinished look, randomness, and the unexpected.

Nevertheless it seemed to Fissif, that there was an intensification of unexpectedness, specifically that there was one more pillar under the porticoes than when he had last passed by. He couldn't be sure which pillar was the newcomer, but he was almost certain there was one.

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The enclosed bridge was close now. Fissif glanced up at the right-hand statue and noted other differences from the one he'd recalled. Although shorter, it seemed to hold itself more strainingly erect, while the frown carved in its dark gray face was not so much one of philosophic brooding as sneering contempt, self-conscious cleverness, and conceit.

Still, none of the three statues toppled forward as he and Slevyas walked under the bridge. However, something else happened to Fissif at that moment.

One of the pillars winked at him.

The Gray Mouser turned round in the right-hand niche, leaped up and caught hold of the cornice, silently vaulted to the flat roof, and crossed it precisely in time to see the two thieves emerge below.

Without hesitation he leaped forward and down, his body straight as a crossbow bolt, the soles of his ratskin boots aimed at the shorter thief's fat-buried shoulder blades, though leading him a little to allow for the yard he'd walk while the Mouser hurtled toward him.

In the instant that he leaped, the tall thief glanced up overshoulder and whipped out a knife, though making no move to push or pull Fissif out of the way of the human projectile speeding toward him.

More swiftly than one would have thought he could manage, Fissif whirled round then and thinly screamed, "Slivikin!"

The ratskin boots took him high in the belly. It was like landing on a big cushion. Writhing aside from Slevyas' thrust, the Mouser somersaulted forward, and as the fat thief's skull hit a cobble with a dull *bong* he came to his feet with dirk in hand, ready to take on the tall one.

But there was no need. Slevyas, his eyes glazed, was toppling too.

One of the pillars had sprung forward, trailing a voluminous robe. A big hood had fallen back from a youthful face and long-haired head. Brawny arms had emerged from the long, loose sleeves that had been the pillar's topmost section. While the big fist ending one of the arms had dealt Slevyas a shrewd knockout punch on the chin.

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser faced each other across the two thieves sprawled senseless. They were poised for attack, yet for the moment neither moved.

Fafhrd said, "Our motives for being here seem identical."

"Seem? Surely must be!" the Mouser answered curtly, fiercely eyeing this potential new foe, who was taller by a head than the tall thief.

"You said?"

"I said, 'Seem? Surely must be!' "

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"How civilized of you!" Fafhrd commented in pleased tones.

"Civilized?" the Mouser demanded suspiciously, gripping his dirk tighter.

"To care, in the eye of action, exactly what's said," Fafhrd explained. Without letting the Mouser out of his vision, he glanced down. His gaze traveled from the pouch of one fallen thief to that of the other. Then he looked up at the Mouser with a broad, ingenuous smile.

"Fifty-fifty?" he suggested.

The Mouser hesitated, sheathed his dirk, and rapped out, "A deal!" He knelt abruptly, his fingers on the drawstrings of Fissif's pouch. "Loot you Slivikin," he directed.

It was natural to suppose that the fat thief had been crying his companion's name at the end.

Without looking up from where he knelt, Fafhrd remarked, "That . . . ferret they had with them. Where did it go?"

"Ferret?" the Mouser answered briefly. "It was a marmoset!"

"Marmoset," Fafhrd mused. "That's a small tropical monkey, isn't it? Well, might have been —I've never been south—but I got the impression that—"

The silent, two-pronged rush which almost overwhelmed them at that instant really surprised neither of them. Each had unconsciously been expecting it.

The three bravoes racing down upon them in concerted attack, all with swords poised to thrust, had assumed that the two highjackers would be armed at most with knives and as timid in weapons-combat as the general run of thieves and counter-thieves. So it was they who were thrown into confusion when with the lightning speed of youth the mouser and Fafhrd sprang up, whipped out fearsomely long swords, and faced them back to back.

The Mouser made a very small parry in carte so that the thrust of the bravo from the east went past his left side by only a hair's breadth. He instantly riposted. His adversary, desperately springing back, parried in turn in carte. Hardly slowing, the tip of the Mouser's long, silm sword dropped under that parry with the delicacy of a princess curtsying and then leapt forward and a little upward and went between two scales of the bravo's armored jerkin and between his ribs and through his heart and out his back as if all were angel food cake.

Meanwhile Fafhrd, facing the two bravoes from the west, swept aside their low thrusts with somewhat larger, down-sweeping parries in seconde and low prime, then flipped up his sword, as long as the Mouser's but heavier, so that it slashed through the neck of his right hand adversary, half decapitating him. Then dropping back a swift step, he readied a thrust for the other.

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But there was no need. A narrow ribbon of bloodied steel, followed by a gray glove and arm, flashed past him from behind and transfixed the last bravo with the identical thrust the Mouser had used on the first.

The two young men wiped their swords. Fafhrd brushed the palm of his open right hand down his robe and held it out. The Mouser pulled off right-hand gray glove and shook it. Without word exchanged, they knelt and finished looting the two unconscious thieves, securing the small bags of jewels. With an oily towel and then a dry one, the Mouser sketchily wiped from his face the greasy ash-soot mixture which had darkened it.

Then, after only a questioning eye-twitch east on the Mouser's part and a nod from Fafhrd, they swiftly walked on in the direction Slevyas and Fissif and their escort had been going.

After reconnoitering Gold Street, they crossed it and continued east on Cash at Fafhrd's gestured proposal.

"My woman's at the Golden Lamprey," he explained.

"Let's pick her up and take her home to meet my girl," the Mouser suggested.

"Home?" Fafhrd inquired politely.

"Dim Lane," the Mouser volunteered.

"Silver Eel?"

"Behind it. We'll have some drinks."

"I'll pick up a jug. Never have too much juice."

"True. I'll let you."

Fafhrd stopped, again wiped right hand on robe, and held it out. "Name's Fafhrd."

Again the Mouser shook it. "Gray Mouser," he said a touch defiantly, as if challenging anyone to laugh at the sobriquet.

"Gray Mouser, eh?" Fafhrd remarked. "Well, you killed yourself a couple of rats tonight."

"That I did." The Mouser's chest swelled and he threw back his head. Then with a comic twitch of his nose and a sidewise half-grin he admitted, "You'd have got your second man easily enough. I stole him from you to demonstrate my speed. Besides, I was excited."

Fafhrd chuckled. "You're telling me? How do you suppose I was feeling?"

Once more the Mouser found himself grinning. What the deuce did this big fellow have that kept him from putting on his usual sneers?

Fafhrd was asking himself a similar question. All his life he'd mistrusted small men, knowing his height awakened their instant jealousy. But this clever little chap was somehow an exception. He prayed to Kos that Vlana would like him.

On the northeast corner of Cash

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and Whore a slow-burning torch shaded by a broad, gilded spiral cast a cone of light up into the thickening black night-smog and another cone down on the cobbles before the tavern door. Out of the shadows into the second cone stepped Vlana, handsome in a narrow black velvet dress and red stockings, her only ornaments a silver-hilted dagger in a silver sheath and a silver-worked black pouch, both on a plain black belt.

Fafhrd introduced the Gray Mouser, who behaved with an almost fawning courtesy. Vlana studied him boldly, then gave him a tentative smile.

Fafhrd opened under the torch the small pouch he'd taken off the tall thief. Vlana looked down into it. She put her arms around Fafhrd, hugged him tight and kissed him soundly. Then she thrust the jewels into the pouch on her belt.

When that was done, he said, "'Look, I'm going to buy a jug. You tell her what happened, Mouser."

When he came out of the Golden Lamprey he was carrying four jugs in the crook of his left arm and wiping his lips on the back of his right hand. Vlana frowned. He grinned at her. The Mouser smacked his lips at the jugs. They continued east on Cash. Fafhrd realized that the frown was for more than the jugs and the prospect of stupidly drunken male revelry. The Mouser tactfully walked ahead.

When his figure was little more than a blob in the thickening smog, Vlana whispered harshly, "You had two members of the Thieves' Guild knocked out cold and you didn't cut their throats?"

"We slew three bravoes," Fafhrd protested by way of excuse.

"My quarrel is not with the Slayers' Brotherhood, but that abominable guild. You swore to me that whenever you had the chance—"

"Vlana! I couldn't have the Gray Mouser thinking I was an amateur counter-thief consumed by hysteria and blood lust."

"Well, he told me that *he'd* have slit their throats in a wink, if he'd known I wanted it that way."

"He was only playing up to you from courtesy."

"Perhaps and perhaps not. But you knew and you didn't—"

"Vlana, shut up!"

Her frown became a rageful glare, then suddenly she laughed widely, smiled twitchingly as if she were about to cry, mastered herself and smiled more lovingly. "Pardon me, darling," she said. "Sometimes you must think I'm going mad and sometimes I believe I am."

"Well, don't," he told her shortly. "Think of the jewels we've won instead. And behave yourself with our new friends. Get some wine

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inside you and relax. I mean to enjoy myself tonight. I've earned it."

She nodded and clutched his arm in agreement and for comfort and sanity. They hurried to catch up with the dim figure ahead.

The Mouser, turning left, led them a half square north on Cheap Street to where a narrower way went east again. The black mist in it looked solid.

"Dim Lane," the Mouser explained.

Vlana said, "Dim's too weak —too *transparent* a word for it tonight," with an uneven laugh in which there were still traces of hysteria and which ended in a fit of strangled coughing.

She gasped out, "Damn Lankhmar's night-smog! What a hell of a city!"

"It's the nearness here of the Great Salt Marsh," Fafhrd explained.

And he did indeed have part of the answer. Lying low betwixt the Marsh, the Inner Sea, the River Hlal, and the southern grain fields watered by canals fed by the Hlal, Lankhmar with its innumerable smokes was the prey of fogs and sooty smogs.

About halfway to Carter Street, a tavern on the north side of the lane emerged from the murk. A gape-jawed serpentine shape of pale metal crested with soot hung high for a sign. Beneath it they passed a door curtained with begrimed leather, the slit in which spilled out noise, pulsing torchlight, and the reek of liquor.

Just beyond the Silver Eel the Mouser led them through an inky passageway outside the tavern's east wall. They had to go single file, feeling their way along rough, slimily bemisted brick.

"Mind the puddle," the Mouser warned. "It's deep as the Outer Sea."

The passageway widened. Reflected torchlight filtering down through the dark mist allowed them to make out only the most general shape of their surroundings. Crowding close to the back of the Silver Eel rose a dismal, rickety building of darkened brick and blackened, ancient wood. From the fourth story attic under the ragged-guttered roof, faint lines of yellow light shone around and through three tightly latticed windows. Beyond was a narrow alley.

"Bones Alley," the Mouser told them.

By now Vlana and Fafhrd could see a long, narrow wooden outside stairway, steep yet sagging and without a rail, leading up to the lighted attic. The Mouser relieved Fafhrd of the jugs and went up it quite swiftly.

"Follow me when I've reached the top," he called back. "I think it'll take your weight, Fafhrd, but best one of you at a time."

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Fafhrd gently pushed Vlana ahead. She mounted to the Mouser where he now stood in an open doorway, from which streamed yellow light that died swiftly in the night-smog. He was lightly resting a hand on a big, empty, wrought-iron lamp-hook firmly set in a stone section of the outside wall. He bowed aside, and she went in.

Fafhrd followed, placing his feet as close as he could to the wall, his hands ready to grab for support. The whole stairs creaked ominously and each step gave a little as he shifted his weight onto it. Near the top, one step gave way with the muted crack of half-rotted wood. Gently as he could, he sprawled himself hand and knee on as many steps as he could get, to distribute his weight, and cursed sulphurously.

"Don't fret, the jugs are safe," the Mouser called down gayly.

Fafhrd crawled the rest of the way and did not get to his feet until he was inside the doorway. When he had done so, he almost gasped with surprise.

It was like rubbing the verdigris from a cheap brass ring and revealing a rainbow-fired diamond of the first water. Rich drapes, some twinkling with embroidery of silver and gold, covered the walls except where the shuttered windows were—and the shutters of those were gilded. Similar but darker fabrics hid the low ceiling, making a gorgeous canopy in which the flecks of gold and silver were like stars. Scattered about were plump cushions and low tables, on which burned a multitude of candles. On shelves against the walls was neatly stacked like small logs a vast reserve of candles, numerous scrolls, jugs, bottles, and enameled boxes. In a large fireplace was set a small metal stove, neatly blacked, with an ornate firepot. Also set beside the stove was a tidy pyramid of thin, resinous torches with frayed ends—fire-kindlers and other pyramids of small, short logs and gleamingly black coal.

On a low dais by the fireplace was a couch covered with cloth of gold. On it sat a thin, pale-faced, delicately handsome girl clad in a dress of thick violet silk worked with silver and belted with a silver chain. Silver pins headed with amethysts held in place her high-piled black hair. Round her shoulders was drawn a wrap of snow-white serpent fur. She was leaning forward with uneasy-seeming graciousness and extending a narrow white hand which shook a little to Vlana, who knelt before her and now gently took the proffered hand and bowed her head over it, her own glossy, straight, dark-brown hair making a canopy, and pressed its back to her lips.

Fafhrd was happy to see his woman playing up properly to this definitely odd, though delightful

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situation. Then looking at Vlana's long, red-stockinged leg stretched far behind her as she knelt on the other, he noted that the floor was everywhere strewn—to the point of double, treble, and quadruple overlaps—with thick-piled, close-woven, many-hued rugs of the finest quality imported from the Eastern Lands. Before he knew it, his thumb had shot toward the Gray Mouser.

"You're the Rug Robber!" he proclaimed. "You're the Carpet Crimp!—and the Candle Corsair too!" he continued, referring to two series of unsolved thefts which had been on the lips of all Lankhmar when he and Vlana had arrived a moon ago.

The Mouser shrugged impassive-faced at Fafhrd, then suddenly grinned, his slitted eyes a-twinkle, and broke into an impromptu dance which carried him whirling and jigging around the room and left him behind Fafhrd, where he deftly reached down the hooded and long-sleeved huge robe from the latter's stooping shoulders, shook it out, carefully folded it, and set it on a pillow.

The girl in violet nervously patted with her free hand the cloth of gold beside her, and Vlana seated herself there, carefully not too close, and the two women spoke together in low voices, Vlana taking the lead.

The Mouser took off his own gray, hooded cloak and laid it beside Fafhrd's. Then they unbelted their swords, and the Mouser set them atop folded robe and cloak.

Without those weapons and bulking garments, the two men looked suddenly like youths, both with clear, close-shaven faces, both slender despite the swelling muscles of Fafhrd's arms and calves, he with long red-gold hair falling down his back and about his shoulders, the Mouser with dark hair cut in bangs, the one in brown leather tunic worked with copper wire, the other in jerkin of coarsely woven gray silk.

They smiled at each other. The feeling each had of having turned boy all at once made their smiles embarrassed. The Mouser cleared his throat and, bowing a little, but looking still at Fafhrd, extended a loosely spread-fingered arm toward the golden couch and said with a preliminary stammer, though otherwise smoothly enough, "Fafhrd, my good friend, permit me to introduce you to my princess. Ivrian, my dear, receive Fafhrd graciously if you please, for tonight he and I fought back to back against three and we conquered."

Fafhrd advanced, stooping a little, the crown of his red-gold hair brushing the be-starred canopy, and knelt before Ivrian exactly as Vlana had. The slender hand extended to him looked steady now, but was still quiveringly a-tremble, he discovered as soon as he touched it. He handled it as if it

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were silk woven of the white spider's gossamer, barely brushing it with his lips, and still felt nervous as he mumbled some compliments.

He did not sense that the Mouser was quite as nervous as he, if not more so, praying hard that Ivrian would not overdo her princess part and snub their guests, or collapse in trembling or tears, for Fafhrd and Vlana were literally the first beings that he had brought into the luxurious nest he had created for his aristocratic beloved—save the two love birds that twittered in a silver cage hanging to the other side of the fireplace from the dais.

Despite his shrewdness and cynicism, it never occurred to the Mouser that it was chiefly his charming but preposterous coddling of Ivrian that was making her doll-like.

But now as Ivrian smiled at last, the Mouser relaxed with relief, fetched two silver cups and two silver mugs, carefully selected a bottle of violet wine, then with a grin at Fafhrd uncorked instead one of the jugs the Northerner had brought, and near-brimmed the four gleaming vessels and served them all four.

With no trace of stammer this time, he toasted, "To my greatest theft to date in Lankhmar, which willy-nilly I must share fifty-fifty with—"He couldn't resist the sudden impulse "—with this great, long-haired, barbarian lout here!" And he downed a quarter of his mug of pleasantly burning wine fortified with brandy.

Fafhrd quaffed off half of his, then toasted back,"To the most boastful and finical little civilized chap I've ever deigned to share loot with," quaffed off the rest, and with a great smile that showed white teeth, held out his empty mug.

The Mouser gave him a refill, topped off his own, then set that down to go to Ivrian and pour into her lap from their small pouch the gems he'd filched from Fissif. They gleamed in their new, enviable location like a small puddle of rainbow-hued quicksilver.

Ivrian jerked back a-tremble, almost spilling them, but Vlana gently caught her arm, steadying it. At Ivrian's direction, Vlana fetched a blue-enameled box inlaid with silver, and the two of them transferred the jewels from Ivrian's lap into its blue velvet interior. Then they chatted on.

As he worked through his second mug in smaller gulps, Fafhrd relaxed and began to get a deeper feeling of his surroundings. The dazzling wonder of the first glimpse of this throne room in a slum faded, and he began to note the ricketiness and rot under the grand overlay.

Black, rotten wood showed here and there between the drapes and loosed its sick, ancient stinks.

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The whole floor sagged under the rugs, as much as a span at the center of the room. Threads of night-smog were coming through the shutters, making evanescent black arabesques against the gilt. The stones of the large fireplace had been scrubbed and varnished, yet most of the mortar was gone from between them; some sagged, others were missing altogether.

The Mouser had been building a fire there in the stove. Now he pushed in all the way the yellow-flaring kindler he'd lit from the fire-pot, hooked the little black door shut over the mounting flames, and turned back into the room. As if he'd read Fafhrd's mind, he took up several cones of incense, set their peaks a-smolder at the fire-pot, and placed them about the room in gleaming, shallow brass bowls. Then he stuffed silken rags in the widest shutter-cracks, took up his silver mug again, and for a moment gave Fafhrd a very hard look.

Next moment he was smiling and lifting his mug to Fafhrd, who was doing the same. Need of refills brought them close together. Hardly moving his lips, the Mouser explained, "Ivrian's father was a duke. I slew him. A most cruel man, cruel to his daughter too, yet a duke, so that Ivrian is wholly unused to fending for herself. I pride myself that I maintain her in grander state than her father did with all his servants."

Fafhrd nodded and said amiably, "Surely you've thieved together a charming little palace."

From the couch Vlana called in her husky contralto, "Gray Mouser, your Princess would hear an account of tonight's adventure. And might we have more wine?"

Ivrian called, "Yes, please, Mouser."

The Mouser looked to Fafhrd for the go-ahead, got the nod, and launched into his story. But first he served the girls wine. There wasn't enough for their cups, so he opened another jug and after a moment of thought uncorked all three, setting one by the couch, one by Fafhrd where he sprawled now on the pillowy carpet, and reserving one for himself. Ivrian looked apprehensive at this signal of heavy drinking ahead, Vlana cynical.

The Mouser told the tale of counter-thievery well, acting it out in part, and with only the most artistic of embellishments—the ferret-marmoset before escaping ran up his body and tried to scratch out his eyes—and he was interrupted only twice.

When he said, "And so with a whish and a snick I bared Scalpel —" Fafhrd remarked, "Oh, so you've nicknamed your sword as well as yourself?"

The Mouser drew himself up. "Yes, and I call my dirk Cat's Claw. Any objections? Seem childish to you?"

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"Not at all. I call my own sword Graywand. Pray continue."

And when he mentioned the beastie of uncertain nature that had gamboled along with the thieves (and attacked his eyes!), Ivrian paled and said with a shudder, "Mouser! That sounds like a witch's familiar!"

"Wizard's," Vlana corrected. "Those gutless Guild-villains have no truck with women, except as fee'd or forced vehicles for their lust. But Krovas, their current king, is noted for taking *all* precautions, and might well have a warlock in his service."

"That seems most likely; it harrows me with dread," the Mouser agreed with ominous gaze and sinister voice, eagerly accepting any and all atmospheric enhancements of his performance.

When he was done, the girls, eyes flashing and fond, toasted him and Fafhrd for their cunning and bravery. The Mouser bowed and eye-twinklingly smiled about, then sprawled him down with a weary sigh, wiping his forehead with a silken cloth and downing a large drink.

After asking Vlana's leave, Fafhrd told the adventurous tale of their escape from Cold Corner —he from his clan, she from an acting troupe—and of their progress to Lankhmar, where they lodged now in an actors' tenement near the Plaza of Dark Delights. Ivrian hugged herself to Vlana and shivered large-eyed at the witchy parts of his tale.

The only proper matter he omitted from his account was Vlana's fixed intent to get a monstrous revenge on the Thieves' Guild for torturing to death her accomplices and harrying her out of Lankhmar when she'd tried freelance thieving in the city before they met. Nor of course did he mention his own promise—foolish, he thought now—to help her in this bloody business.

After he'd done and got his applause, he found his throat dry despite his skald's training, but when he sought to wet it, he discovered that his mug was empty and his jug too, though he didn't feel in the least drunk—he had talked all the liquor out of him, he told himself, a little of the stuff escaping in each glowing word he'd spoken.

The Mouser was in like plight and not drunk either—though inclined to pause mysteriously and peer toward infinity before answering question or making remark. This time he suggested, after a particularly long infinity-gaze, that Fafhrd accompany him to the Eel while he purchased a fresh supply.

"But we've a lot of wine left in *our* jug," Ivrian protested. "Or at least a little," she amended. It did sound empty when Vlana shook it. "Besides, you've wine of all sorts here."

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"Not this sort, dearest, and first rule is never mix 'em," the Mouser explained, wagging a finger. "That way lies unhealth, aye, and madness."

"My dear," Vlana said, sympathetically patting her wrist, "at some time in any good party all the men who are really men simply have to go out. It's extremely stupid, but it's their nature and can't be dodged, believe me."

"But, Mouser, I'm scared. Fafhrd's tale frightened me. So did yours—I'll hear that familiar a-scratch at the shutters when you're gone, I know I will!"

"Darlingest," the Mouser said with a small hiccup, "there is all the Inner Sea, all the Land of the Eight Cities, and to boot all the Trollstep Mountains in their sky-scraping grandeur between you and Fafhrd's Cold Corner and its silly sorcerers. As for familiars, pish!—they've never in the world been anything but the loathy, all-too-natural pets of stinking old women and womanish old men."

Vlana said merrily, "Let the sillies go, my dear. 'Twill give us chance for a private chat, during which we'll take 'em apart from wine-fumey head to restless foot."

So Ivrian let herself be persuaded, and the Mouser and Fafhrd slipped off, quickly shutting the door behind them to keep out the night-smog, and the girls heard their light steps down the stairs.

Waiting for the four jugs to be brought up from the Eel's cellar, the two newly met comrades ordered a mug each of the same fortified wine, or one near enough, and ensconced themselves at the least noisy end of the long serving counter in the tumultuous tavern. The Mouser deftly kicked a rat that thrust black head and shoulders from his hole.

After each had enthusiastically complimented the other on his girl, Fafhrd said diffidently, "Just between ourselves, do you think there might be anything to your sweet Ivrian's notion that the small dark creature with Slivikin and the other Guild-thief was a wizard's familiar, or at any rate the cunning pet of a sorcerer, trained to act as go-between and report disasters to his master or to Krovas?"

The Mouser laughed lightly. "You're building bugbears—formless baby ones unlicked by logic—out of nothing, dear barbarian brother, if I may say so. How could that vermin make useful report? I don't believe in animals that talk—except for parrots and such birds, which only . . . parrot.

"Ho, there, you back of the counter! Where are my jugs? Rats eaten the boy who went for them days ago? Or he simply starved to death while on his cellar quest? Well, tell him to get a swifter move on and brim us again!

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"No, Fafhrd, even granting the beastie to be directly or indirectly a creature of Krovas, and that it raced back to Thieves' House after our affray, what would that tell them there? Only that something had gone wrong with the burglary at Jengao's."

Fafhrd frowned and muttered stubbornly, "The furry slinker might, nevertheless, somehow convey our appearances to the Guild masters, and they might recognize us and come after us and attack us in our homes."

"My dear friend," the Mouser said condolingly, "once more begging your indulgence, I fear this potent wine is addling your wits. If the Guild knew our looks or where we lodge, they'd have been nastily on our necks days, weeks, nay, months ago. Or conceivably you don't know that their penalty for freelance thieving within the walls of Lankhmar is nothing less than death, after torture, if happily that can be achieved."

"I know all about that, and my plight is worse even than yours," Fafhrd retorted, and after pledging the Mouser to secrecy, told him the tale of Vlana's vendetta against the Guild and her deadly serious dreams of an all-encompassing revenge.

During his story the four jugs came up from the cellar, but the Mouser only ordered that their earthenware mugs be refilled.

Fafhrd finished, "And so, in consequence of a promise given by an infatuated and unschooled boy in a southern angle of the Cold Waste, I find myself now as a sober—well, at other times—man being constantly asked to make war on a power as great as that of Lankhmar's overlord, for as you may know, the Guild has locals in all other cities and major towns of this land. I love Vlana dearly and she is an experienced thief herself, but on this one topic she has a kink in her brains, a hard knot neither logic nor persuasion can even begin to loosen."

"Certes t'would be insanity to assault the Guild direct, your wisdom's perfect there," the Mouser commented. "If you cannot break your most handsome girl of this mad notion, or coax her from it, then you must stoutly refuse e'en her least request in that direction."

"Certes I must," Fafhrd agreed with great emphasis and conviction. "I'd be an idiot taking on the Guild. Of course, if they should catch me, they'd kill me in any case for freelancing and highjacking. But wantonly to assault the Guild direct, kill one Guild-thief needlessly—lunacy entire!"

"You'd not only be a drunken, drooling idiot, you'd questionless be stinking in three nights at most from that emperor of diseases, Death. Malicious attacks on her person, blows directed at the organization, the Guild requites tenfold what she does other rule-

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breaking, freelancing included. So, no least giving-in to Vlana in this one matter."

"Agreed!" Fafhrd said loudly, shaking the Mouser's iron-thewed hand in a near crusher grip.

"And now we should be getting back to the girls," the Mouser said.

"After one more drink while we settle the score. Ho, boy!"

"Suits."

Vlana and Ivrian, deep in excited talk, both started at the pounding rush of footsteps up the stairs. Racing behemoths could hardly have made more noise. The creaking and groaning were prodigious, and there were the crashes of two treads breaking. The door flew open and their two men rushed in through a great mushroom top of night-smog which was neatly sliced off its black stem by the slam of the door.

"I told you we'd be back in a wink," the Mouser cried gayly to Ivrian, while Fafhrd strode forward, unmindful of the creaking floor, crying, "Dearest heart, I've missed you sorely," and caught up Vlana despite her voiced protests and pushings-off and kissed and hugged her soundly before setting her back on the couch again.

Oddly, it was Ivrian who appeared to be angry at Fafhrd then, rather than Vlana, who was smiling fondly if somewhat dazedly.

"Fafhrd, sir," she said boldly, her little fists set on her narrow hips, her tapered chin held high, her dark eyes blazing, "my beloved Vlana has been telling me about the unspeakably atrocious things the Thieves' Guild did to her and to her dearest friends. Pardon my frank speaking to one I've only met, but I think it quite unmanly of you to refuse her the just revenge she desires and fully deserves. And that goes for you too, Mouser, who boasted to Vlana of what you would have done had you but known, all the while intending only empty ingratiation. You who in like case did not scruple to slay my very own father!"

It was clear to Fafhrd that while he and the Gray Mouser had idly boozed in the Eel, Vlana had been giving Ivrian a doubtless empurpled account of her grievances against the Guild and playing mercilessly on the naive girl's bookish, romantic sympathies and high concept of knightly honor. It was also clear to him that Ivrian was more than a little drunk. A three-quarters empty flask of violet wine of far Kiraay sat on the low table next the couch.

Yet he could think of nothing to do but spread his big hands helplessly and bow his head, more than the low ceiling made necessary, under Ivrian's glare, now reinforced by that of Vlana. After all, they *were* in the right. He *had* promised.

So it was the Mouser who first tried to rebut.

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"Come now, pet," he cried lightly as he danced about the room, silk-stuffing more cracks against the thickening night-smog and stirring up and feeding the fire in the stove, "and you too, beauteous Lady Vlana. For the past month Fafhrd has by his highjackings been hitting the Guild-thieves where it hurts them most—in their purses a-dangle between their legs. Come, drink we up all." Under his handling, one of the new jugs came uncorked with a pop, and he darted about brimming silver cups and mugs.

"A merchant's revenge!" Ivrian retorted with scorn, not one whit appeased, but rather enangered anew. "At the least you and Fafhrd must bring Vlana the head of Krovas!"

"What would she *do* with it? What *good* would it be except to spot the carpets?" the Mouser plaintively inquired, while Fafhrd, gathering his wits at last and going down on one knee, said slowly, "Most respected Lady Ivrian, it is true I solemnly promised my beloved Vlana I would help her in her revenge, but if Mouser and I should bring Vlana the head of Krovas, she and I would have to flee Lankhmar on the instant, every man's hand against us. While you infallibly would lose this fairyland Mouser has created for love of you and be forced to do likewise, be with him a beggar on the run for the rest of your natural lives."

While Fafhrd spoke, Ivrian snatched up her new-filled cup and drained it. Now she stood up straight as a soldier, her pale face flushed, and said scathingly, "*You count the cost*! You speak to me of *things*—" She waved at the many-hued splendor around her, "—of mere property, however costly—when *honor* is at stake. You gave Vlana *your word*. Oh, is knighthood wholly dead?"

Fafhrd could only shrug again and writhe inside and gulp a little easement from his silver mug.

In a master stroke, Vlana tried gently to draw Ivrian down to her golden seat again. "Softly, dearest," she pled. "You have spoken nobly for me and my cause, and believe me, I am most grateful. Your words revived in me great, fine feelings dead these many years. But of us here, only you are truly an aristocrat attuned to the highest proprieties. We other three are naught but thieves. Is it any wonder some of us put safety above honor and word-keeping, and most prudently avoid risking our lives? Yes, we are three thieves and I am outvoted. So please speak no more of honor and rash, dauntless bravery, but sit you down and —"

"You mean they're both *afraid* to challenge the Thieves' Guild, don't you?" Ivrian said, eyes wide and face twisted by loathing. "I

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always thought my Mouser was a nobleman first and a thief second. Thieving's nothing. My father lived by cruel thievery done on rich wayfarers and neighbors less powerful than he, yet he was an aristocrat. Oh, you're *cowards*, both of you! *Poltroons*!" she finished, turning her eyes flashing with cold scorn first on the Mouser, then on Fafhrd.

The latter could stand it no longer. He sprang to his feet, face flushed, fists clenched at his sides, quite unmindful of his down-clattered mug and the ominous creak his sudden action drew from the sagging floor.

"*I am not a coward*!" he cried. "I'll dare Thieves' House and fetch you Krovas' head and toss it with blood a-drip at Vlana's feet. I swear that by my sword Graywand here at my side!"

He slapped his left hip, found nothing there but his tunic, and had to content himself with pointing tremble-armed at his belt and scabbarded sword where they lay atop his neatly folded robe—and then picking up, refilling splashily, and draining his mug.

The Gray Mouser began to laugh in high, delighted, tuneful peals. All stared at him. He came dancing up beside Fafhrd, and still smiling widely, asked, "*Why not*? Who speaks of fearing the Guild-thieves? Who becomes upset at the prospect of this ridiculously easy exploit, when all of us know that all of them, even Krovas and his ruling clique, are but pygmies in mind and skill compared to me or Fafhrd here? A wondrously simple, foolproof scheme has just occurred to me for penetrating Thieves' House, every closet and cranny. Stout Fafhrd and I will put it into effect at once. Are you with me, Northerner?"

"Of course I am," Fafhrd responded gruffly, at the same time frantically wondering what madness had gripped the little fellow.

"Give me a few heartbeats to gather needed props, and we're off!" the Mouser cried. He snatched from shelf and unfolded a stout sack, then raced about, thrusting into it coiled ropes, bandage rolls, rags, jars of ointment and unction and unguent, and other oddments.

"But you can't go *tonight*," Ivrian protested, suddenly grown pale and uncertain-voiced. "You're both . . . in no condition to."

"You're both *drunk*," Vlana said harshly. "Silly drunk—and that way you'll get naught in Thieves' House but your deaths. Fafhrd! Control yourself!"

"Oh, no," Fafhrd told her as he buckled on his sword. "You wanted the head of Krovas heaved at your feet in a great splatter of blood, and that's what you're going to get, like it or not!"

"Softly, Fafhrd," the Mouser interjected, coming to a sudden stop

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and drawing tight the sack's mouth by its strings. "And softly you too, Lady Vlana, and my dear princess. Tonight I intend but a scouting expedition. No risks run, only the information gained needful for planning our murderous strike tomorrow or the day after. So no head-choppings whatsoever tonight, Fafhrd, you hear me? Whatever may hap, hist's the word. And don your hooded robe."

Fafhrd shrugged, nodded, and obeyed.

Ivrian seemed somewhat relieved. Vlana too, though she said, "Just the same you're both drunk."

"All to the good!" the Mouser assured her with a mad smile. "Drink may slow a man's sword-arm and soften his blows a bit, but it sets his wits ablaze and fires his imagination, and those are the qualities we'll need tonight."

Vlana eyed him dubiously.

Under cover of this confab Fafhrd made quietly yet swiftly to fill once more his and the Mouser's mugs, but Vlana noted it and gave him such a glare that he set down mugs and uncorked jug so swiftly his robe swirled.

The Mouser shouldered his sack and drew open the door. With a casual wave at the girls, but no word spoken, Fafhrd stepped out on the tiny porch. The night-smog had grown so thick he was almost lost to view. The Mouser waved four fingers at Ivrian, then followed Fafhrd.

"Good fortune go with you," Vlana called heartily.

"Oh, be careful, Mouser," Ivrian gasped.

The Mouser, his figure slight against the loom of Fafhrd's, silently drew shut the door.

Their arms automatically gone around each other, the girls waited for the inevitable creaking and groaning of the stairs. It delayed and delayed. The night-smog that had entered the room dissipated and still the silence was unbroken.

"What can they be doing out there?" Ivrian whispered. "Plotting their course?"

Vlana impatiently shook her head, then disentangled herself, tiptoed to the door, opened it, descended softly a few steps, which creaked most dolefully, then returned, shutting the door behind her.

"They're gone," she said in wonder.

"I'm frightened!" Ivrian breathed and sped across the room to embrace the taller girl.

Vlana hugged her tight, then disengaged an arm to shoot the door's three heavy bolts.

In Bones Alley the Mouser returned to his pouch the knotted line by which they'd descended from the lamp hook. He suggested, "How about stopping at the Silver Eel?"

"You mean and just *tell* the girls we've been to Thieves' House?" Fafhrd asked.

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"Oh, no," the Mouser protested. "But you missed your stirrup cup upstairs—and so did I."

With a crafty smile Fafhrd drew from his robe two full jugs.

"Palmed 'em, as 'twere, when I set down the mugs. Vlana sees a lot, but not all."

"You're a prudent, far-sighted fellow," the Mouser said admiringly. "I'm proud to call you comrade."

Each uncorked and drank a hearty slug. Then the Mouser led them west, they veering and stumbling only a little, and then north into an even narrower and more noisome alley.

"Plague Court," the Mouser said.

After several preliminary peepings and peerings, they staggered swiftly across wide, empty Crafts Street and into Plague Court again. For a wonder it was growing a little lighter. Looking upward, they saw stars. Yet there was no wind blowing from the north. The air was deathly still.

In their drunken preoccupation with the project at hand and mere locomotion, they did not look behind them. There the night-smog was thicker than ever. A high-circling nighthawk would have seen the stuff converging from all sections of Lankhmar in swift-moving black rivers and rivulets, heaping, eddying, swirling, dark and reeking essence of Lankhmar from its branding irons, braziers, bonfires, kitchen fires and warmth fires, kilns, forges, breweries, distilleries, junk and garbage fires innumerable, sweating alchemists' and sorcers' dens, crematoriums, charcoal burners' turfed mounds, all those and many more . . . converging purposefully on Dim Lane and particularly on the Silver Eel and the rickety house behind it. The closer to that center it got, the more substantial the smog became, eddy-strands and swirl-tatters tearing off and clinging like black cobwebs to rough stone corners and scraggly surfaced brick.

But the Mouser and Fafhrd merely exclaimed in mild, muted amazement at the stars and cautiously zigzagging across the street of the Thinkers, called Atheist Avenue by moralists, continued up Plague Court until it forked.

The Mouser chose the left branch, which trended northwest.

"Death Alley."

After a curve and recurve, Cheap Street swung into sight about thirty paces ahead. The Mouser stopped at once and lightly threw his arm against Fafhrd's chest.

Clearly in view across Cheap Street was the wide, low, open doorway of Thieves' House, framed by grimy stone blocks. There led up to it two steps hollowed by the treadings of centuries. Orange-yellow light spilled out from bracketed torches inside.

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There was no porter or guard in sight, not even a watchdog on a chain. The effect was ominous.

"Now how do we get into the damn place?" Fafhrd demanded in a hoarse whisper. "That doorway stinks of traps."

The Mouser answered, scornful at last, "Why, we'll walk straight through that doorway you fear." He frowned. "Tap and hobble, rather. Come on, while I prepare us."

As he drew the skeptically grimacing Fafhrd back down Death Alley until all Cheap Street was again cut off from view, he explained, "We'll pretend to be beggars, members of *their* guild, which is but a branch of the Thieves' Guild and reports in to the Begggarmasters at Thieves' House. We'll be new members, who've gone out by day, so it'll not be expected that the Night Beggarmaster will know our looks."

"But we don't look like beggars," Fafhrd protested. "Beggars have awful sores and limbs all atwist or lacking altogether."

"That's just what I'm going to take care of now," the Mouser chuckled, drawing Scalpel. Ignoring Fafhrd's backward step and wary glance, the Mouser gazed puzzledly at the long tapering strip of steel he'd bared, then with a happy nod unclipped from his belt Scalpel's scabbard furbished with ratskin, sheathed the sword and swiftly wrapped it up, hilt and all, spirally, with the wide ribbon of a bandage roll dug from his sack.

"There!" he said, knotting the bandage ends. "Now I've a tapping cane."

"What's that?" Fafhrd demanded. "And why?"

The Mouser laid a flimsy black rag across his own eyes and tied it fast behind his head.

"Because I'll be blind, that's why." He took a few shuffling steps, tapping the cobbles ahead with wrapped sword—gripping it by the quillons, or cross guard, so that the grip and pommel were up his sleeve—and groping ahead with his other hand. "That look all right to you?" he asked Fafhrd as he turned back. "Feels perfect to me. Bat-blind!—eh? Oh, don't fret, Fafhrd—the rag's but gauze. I can see through it—fairly well. Besides, I don't have to convince anyone inside Thieves' House I'm actually blind. Most Guild-beggars fake it, as you must know. Now what to do with you? Can't have you blind also—too obvious, might wake suspicion." He uncorked his jug and sucked inspiration. Fafhrd copied this action, on principle.

The Mouser smacked his lips and said, "I've got it! Fafhrd, stand on your right leg and double up your left behind you at the knee. Hold!—don't fall on me! Avaunt! But steady yourself

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by my shoulder. That's right. Now get that left foot higher. We'll disguise your sword like mine, for a crutch cane—it's thicker and'll look just right. You can also steady yourself with your other hand on my shoulder as you hop—the halt leading the blind. But higher with that left foot! No, it just doesn't come off—I'll have to rope it. But first unclip your scabbard."

Soon the Mouser had Graywand and its scabbard in the same state as Scalpel and was tying Fafhrd's left ankle to his thigh, drawing the rope cruelly tight, though Fafhrd's wine-numbed nerves hardly registered it. Balancing himself with his steel-cored crutch cane as the Mouser worked, he swigged from his jug and pondered deeply.

Brilliant as the Mouser's plan undoubtedly was, there did seem to be drawbacks to it.

"Mouser," he said, "I don't know as I like having our swords tied up, so we can't draw 'em in emergency."

"We can still use 'em as clubs," the Mouser countered, his breath hissing between his teeth as he drew the last knot hard. "Besides, we'll have our knives. Say, pull your belt around until your knife is behind your back, so your robe will hide it sure. I'll do the same with Cat's Claw. Beggars don't carry weapons, at least in view. Stop drinking now, you've had enough. I myself need only a couple swallows more to reach my finest pitch."

"And I don't know as I like going hobbled into that den of cutthroats. I can hop amazingly fast, it's true, but not as fast as I can run. Is it really wise, think you?"

"You can slash yourself loose in an instant," the Mouser hissed with a touch of impatience and anger. "Aren't you willing to make the least sacrifice for art's sake?"

"Oh, very well," Fafhrd said, draining his jug and tossing it aside. "Yes, of course I am."

"Your complexion's too hale," the Mouser said, inspecting him critically. He touched up Fafhrd's features and hands with pale gray grease paint, then added wrinkles with dark. "And your garb's too tidy." He scooped dirt from between the cobbles and smeared it on Fafhrd's robe, then tried to put a rip in it, but the material resisted. He shrugged and tucked his lightened sack under his belt.

"So's yours," Fafhrd observed, and crouching on his right leg got a good handful of muck himself. Heaving himself up with a mighty effort, he wiped the stuff off on the Mouser's cloak and grey silken jerkin too.

The small man cursed, but, "Dramatic consistency," Fafhrd reminded him. "Now come on, while our fires and our stinks are still high." And grasping hold of

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the Mouser's shoulder, he propelled himself rapidly toward Cheap Street, setting his bandaged sword between cobbles well ahead and taking mighty hops.

"Slow down, idiot," the Mouser cried softly, shuffling along with the speed almost of a skater to keep up, while tapping his (sword) cane like mad. "A cripple's supposed to be *feeble*—that's what draws the sympathy."

Fafhrd nodded wisely and slowed somewhat. The ominous empty doorway slid again into view. The Mouser tilted his jug to get the last of his wine, swallowed awhile, then choked sputteringly. Fafhrd snatched and drained the jug, then tossed it over shoulder to shatter noisily.

They hop-shuffled across Cheap Street and without pause up the two worn steps and through the doorway, past the exceptionally thick wall. Ahead was a long, straight, high-ceilinged corridor ending in a stairs and with doors spilling light at intervals and wall-set torches adding their flare, but empty all its length.

They had just got through the doorway when cold steel chilled the neck and pricked a shoulder of each of them. From just above, two voices commanded in unison, "Halt!"

Although fired—and fuddled—by fortified wine, they each had wit enough to freeze and then very cautiously look upward.

Two gaunt, scarred, exceptionally ugly faces, each topped by a gaudy scarf binding back hair, looked down at them from a big, deep niche just above the doorway. Two bent, gnarly arms thrust down the swords that still pricked them.

"Gone out with the noon beggar-batch, eh?" one of them observed. "Well, you'd better have a high take to justify your tardy return. The Night Beggarmaster's on a Whore Street furlough. Report above to Krovas. Gods, you stink! Better clean up first, or Krovas will have you bathed in live steam. Begone!"

The Mouser and Fafhrd shuffled and hobbled forward at their most authentic. One niche-guard cried after them, "Relax, boys! You don't have to put it on here."

"Practice makes perfect,'" the Mouser called back in a quavering voice. Fafhrd's fingerends dug his shoulder warningly. They moved along somewhat more naturally, so far as Fafhrd's tied-up leg allowed. Truly, thought Fafhrd, Kos of the Dooms seemed to be leading him direct to Krovas and perhaps head-chopping *would* be the order of the night. And now he and the Mouser began to hear voices, mostly curt and clipped ones, and other noises.

They passed some doorways they'd liked to have paused at, yet the most they dared do was slow down a bit more.

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Very interesting were some of those activities. In one room young boys were being trained to pick pouches and slit purses. They'd approach from behind an instructor, and if he heard scuff of bare foot or felt touch of dipping hand—or, worst, heard *clunk* of dropped leaden mock-coin—that boy would be thwacked.

In a second room, older student thieves were doing laboratory work in lock picking. One group was being lectured by a grimy-handed graybeard, who was taking apart a most complex lock piece by weighty piece.

In a third, thieves were eating at long tables. The odors were tempting, even to men full of booze. The Guild did well by its members.

In a fourth, the floor was padded in part and instruction was going on in slipping, dodging, ducking, tumbling, tripping, and otherwise foiling pursuit. A voice like a sergeant-major's rasped, "Nah, nah, nah! You couldn't give your crippled grandmother the slip. I said duck, not genuflect to holy Arth. Now this time—"

By that time the Mouser and Fafhrd were halfway up the end stairs, Fafhrd vaulting somewhat laboriously as he grasped curving banister and swaddled sword.

The second floor duplicated the first, but was as luxurious as the other had been bare. Down the long corridor lamps and filagreed incense pots pendent from the ceiling alternated, diffusing a mild light and spicy smell. The walls were richly draped, the floor thick-carpeted. Yet this corridor was empty too and, moreover, *completely* silent. After a glance at each other, they started off boldly.

The first door, wide open, showed an untenanted room full of racks of garments, rich and plain, spotless and filthy, also wig stands, shelves of beards and such. A disguising room, clearly.

The Mouser darted in and out to snatch up a large green flask from the nearest table. He unstoppered and sniffed it. A rotten-sweet gardenia-reek contended with the nose-sting of spirits of wine. The Mouser sloshed his and Fafhrd's fronts with this dubious perfume.

"Antidote to muck," he explained with the pomp of a physician, stoppering the flask. "Don't want to be parboiled by Krovas. No, no, no."

Two figures appeared at the far end of the corridor and came toward them. The Mouser hid the flask under his cloak, holding it between elbow and side, and he and Fafhrd continued boldly onward.

The next three doorways they passed were shut by heavy doors. As they neared the fifth, the two approaching figures, coming on

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arm-in-arm, became distinct. Their clothing was that of noblemen, but their faces those of thieves. They were frowning with indignation and suspicion, too, at the Mouser and Fafhrd.

Just then, from somewhere between the two man-pairs, a voice began to speak words in a strange tongue, using the rapid monotone priests employ in a routine service, or some sorcerers in their incantations.

The two richly clad thieves slowed at the seventh doorway and looked in. Their progress ceased altogether. Their necks strained, their eyes widened. They paled. Then of a sudden they hastened onward, almost running, and by-passed Fafhrd and the Mouser as if they were furniture. The incantatory voice drummed on without missing a beat.

The fifth doorway was shut, but the sixth was open. The Mouser peeked in with one eye, his nose brushing the jamb. Then he stepped forward and gazed inside with entranced expression, pushing the black rag up onto his forehead for better vision. Fafhrd joined him.

It was a large room, empty so far as could be told of human and animal life, but filled with most interesting things. From knee-height up, the entire far wall was a map of the city of Lankhmar. Every building and street seemed depicted, down to the meanest hovel and narrowest court. There were signs of recent erasure and redrawing at many spots, and here and there little colored hieroglyphs of mysterious import.

The floor was marble, the ceiling blue as lapis lazuli. The side walls were thickly hung, the one with all manner of thieves' tools, from a huge, thick, pry-bar that looked as if it could unseat the universe, to a rod so slim it might be an elf-queen's wand and seemingly designed to telescope out and fish from a distance for precious gauds on milady's spindle-legged, ivory-topped vanity table. The other wall had padlocked to it all sorts of quaint, gold-gleaming and jewel-flashing objects, evidently mementos chosen for their oddity from the spoils of memorable burglaries, from a female mask of thin gold, breathlessly beautiful in its features and contours but thickly set with rubies simulating the spots of the pox in its fever stage, to a knife whose blade was wedge-shaped diamonds set side by side and this diamond cutting-edge looking razor-sharp.

In the center of the room was a bare round table of ebony and ivory squares. About it were set seven straight-backed but well-padded chairs, the one facing the map and away from the Mouser and Fafhrd being higher backed and wider armed than the others —a chief's chair, likely that of Krovas.

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The Mouser tiptoed forward, irresistibly drawn, but Fafhrd's left hand clamped down on his shoulder.

Scowling his disapproval, the Northerner brushed down the black rag over the Mouser's eyes again and with his crutch-hand thumbed ahead, then set off in that direction in most carefully calculated, silent hops. With a shrug of disappointment the Mouser followed.

As soon as they had turned away from the doorway, a neatly black-bearded, crop-haired head came like a serpent's around the side of the highest-backed chair and gazed after them from deep-sunken yet glinting eyes. Next a snake-supple, long hand followed the head out, crossed thin lips with ophidian forefinger for silence, and then finger-beckoned the two pairs of dark-tunicked men who were standing to either side of the doorway, their backs to the corridor wall, each of the four gripping a curvy knife in one hand and a dark leather, lead-weighted bludgeon in the other.

When Fafhrd was halfway to the seventh doorway, from which the monotonous yet sinister recitation continued to well, there shot out through it a slender, whey-faced youth, his narrow hands clapped over his mouth, under terror-wide eyes, as if to shut in screams or vomit, and with a broom clamped in an armpit, so that he seemed a bit like a young warlock about to take to the air. He dashed past Fafhrd and the Mouser and away, his racing footsteps sounding rapid-dull on the carpeting and hollow-sharp on the stairs before dying away.

Fafhrd gazed back at the Mouser with a grimace and shrug, then squatting one-legged until the knee of his bound-up leg touched the floor, advanced half his face past the doorjamb. After a bit, without otherwise changing position, he beckoned the Mouser to approach. The latter slowly thrust half his face past the jamb, just above Fafhrd's.

What they saw was a room somewhat smaller than that of the great map and lit by central lamps that burnt blue-white instead of customary yellow. The floor was marble, darkly colorful and complexly whorled. The dark walls were hung with astrological and anthropomantic charts and instruments of magic and shelved with cryptically labeled porcelain jars and also with vitreous flasks and glass pipes of the oddest shapes, some filled with colored fluids, but many gleamingly empty. At the foot of the walls, where the shadows were thickest, broken and discarded stuff was irregularly heaped, as if swept out of the way and forgot, and here and there opened a large rathole.

In the center of the room and brightly illuminated by contrast

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was a long table with thick top and many stout legs. The Mouser thought fleetingly of a centipede and then of the bar at the Eel, for the table top was densely stained and scarred by many a spilt elixir and many a deep black burn by fire or acid or both.

In the midst of the table an alembic was working. The lamp's flame—deep blue, this one—kept a-boil in the large crystal cucurbit a dark, viscid fluid with here and there diamond glints. From out of the thick, seething stuff, strands of a darker vapor streamed upward to crowd through the cucurbit's narrow mouth and stain—oddly, with bright scarlet—the transparent head and then, dead black now, flow down the narrow pipe from the head into a spherical crystal receiver, larger even than the cucurbit, and there curl and weave about like so many coils of living black cord—an endless, skinny, ebon serpent.

Behind the left end of the table stood a tall, yet hunch-backed man in black robe and hood, which shadowed more than hid a face of which the most prominent features were a long, thick, pointed nose with out-jutting, almost chinless mouth. His complexion was sallow-gray like sandy clay. A short-haired, bristly, gray beard grew high on his wide cheeks. From under a receding forehead and bushy gray brows, wide-set eyes looked intently down at an age-browned scroll, which his disgustingly small club-hands, knuckles big, short backs gray-bristled, ceaselessly unrolled and rolled up again. The only move his eyes ever made, besides the short side-to-side one as he read the lines he was rapidly intoning, was an occasional glance at the alembic.

On the other end of the table, beady eyes darting from the sorcerer to the alembic and back again, crouched a small black beast, the first glimpse of which made Fafhrd dig fingers painfully into the Mouser's shoulder and the latter almost gasp, but not from the pain. It was most like a rat, yet it had a higher forehead and closer-set eyes, while its forepaws, which it constantly rubbed together in what seemed restless glee, looked like tiny copies of the sorcerer's clubhands.

Simultaneously yet independently, Fafhrd and the Mouser each became certain it was the beast which had gutter-escorted Slivikin and his mate, then fled, and each recalled what Ivrian had said about a witch's familiar and Vlana about the likelihood of Krovas employing a warlock.

The tempo of the incantation quickened; the blue-white flames brightened and hissed audibly; the fluid in the cucurbit grew thick as lava; great bubbles formed and loudly broke; the black rope in the receiver writhed like a nest

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of snakes; there was an increasing sense of invisible presences; the supernatural tension grew almost unendurable, and Fafhrd and the Mouser were hard put to keep silent the open-mouthed gapes by which they now breathed, and each feared his heartbeat could be heard yards away.

Abruptly the incantation peaked and broke off, like a drum struck very hard, then instantly silenced by palm and fingers outspread against the head. With a bright flash and dull explosion, cracks innumerable appeared in the cucurbit; its crystal became white and opaque, yet it did not shatter or drip. The head lifted a span, hung there, fell back. While two black nooses appeared among the coils in the receiver and suddenly narrowed until they were only two big black knots.

The sorcerer grinned, let the end of the parchment roll up with a snap, and shifted his gaze from the receiver to his familiar, while the latter chittered shrilly and bounded up and down in rapture.

"Silence, Slivikin! Comes now *your* time to race and strain and sweat," the sorcerer cried, speaking pidgin Lankhmarese now, but so rapidly and in so squeakingly high-pitched a voice that Fafhrd and the Mouser could barely follow him. They did, however, both realize they had been completely mistaken as to the identity of Slivikin. In moment of disaster, the fat thief had called to the witch-beast for help rather than to his human comrade.

"Yes, master," Slivikin squeaked back no less clearly, in an instant revising the Mouser's opinions about talking animals. He continued in the same fife-like, fawning tones, "Harkening in obedience, Hristomilo."

Hristomilo ordered in whip-lash pipings, "To your appointed work! See to it you summon an ample sufficiency of feasters!—I want the bodies stripped to skeletons, so the bruises of the enchanted smog and all evidence of death by suffocation will be vanished utterly. But forget not the loot! On your mission, now—depart!"

Slivikin, who at every command had bobbed his head in manner reminiscent of his bouncing, now squealed, "I'll see it done!" and gray lightning-like, leaped a long leap to the floor and down an inky rathole.

Hristomilo, rubbing together his disgusting clubhands much as Slivikin had his, cried chucklingly, "What Slevyas lost, my magic has re-won!"

Fafhrd and the Mouser drew back out of the doorway, partly for fear of being seen, partly in revulsion from what they had seen and heard, and in poignant if useless pity for Slevyas, whoever he might be, and for the other unknown victims of the rat-like

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and conceivably rat-related sorcerer's deathspells, poor strangers already dead and due to have their flesh eaten from their bones.

Fafhrd wrested the green bottle from the Mouser and, though almost gagging on the rotten-flowery reek, gulped a large, stinging mouthful. The Mouser couldn't quite bring himself to do the same, but was comforted by the spirits of wine he inhaled.

Then he saw, beyond Fafhrd, standing before the doorway to the map room, a richly clad man with gold-hilted knife jewel-scabbarded at his side. His sunken-eyed face was prematurely wrinkled by responsibility, overwork, and authority, and framed by neatly cropped black hair and beard. Smiling, he silently beckoned them with a serpentine gesture.

The Mouser and Fafhrd obeyed, the latter returning the green bottle to the former, who recapped it and thrust it under his left elbow with well-concealed irritation.

Each guessed their summoner was Krovas, the Guild's Grandmaster. Once again Fafhrd marveled, as he hobbledehoyed along, reeling and belching, how Kos or the Fates were guiding him to his target tonight. The Mouser, more alert and more apprehensive too, was reminding himself that they had been directed by the niche-guards to report to Krovas, so that the situation, if not developing quite in accord with his own misty plans, was still not deviating disastrously.

Yet not even his alertness, nor Fafhrd's primeval instincts, gave them forewarning as they followed Krovas into the map room.

Two steps inside, each of them was shoulder-grabbed and bludgeon-menaced by a pair of ruffians further armed with knives tucked in their belts.

"All secure, Grandmaster," one of the ruffians rapped out.

Krovas swung the highest-backed chair around and sat down, eying them coolly.

"What brings two stinking, drunken beggar-guildsmen into the top-restricted precincts of the masters?" he asked quietly.

The Mouser felt the sweat of relief bead his forehead. The disguises he had brilliantly conceived were still working, taking in even the head man, though he had spotted Fafhrd's tipsiness. Resuming his blind-man manner, he quavered, "We were directed by the guard above the Cheap Street door to report to you in person, great Krovas, the Night Beggar-master being on furlough for reasons of sexual hygiene. Tonight we've made good haul!" And fumbling in his purse, ignoring as far as possible the tightened grip on his shoulders, he brought out a golden coin and displayed it trembling-handed.

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"Spare me your inexpert acting," Krovas said sharply. "I'm not one of your marks. And take that rag off your eyes."

The Mouser obeyed and stood to attention again insofar as his pinioning would permit, and smiling the more seeming carefree because of his reawakening uncertainties. Conceivably he wasn't doing quite as brilliantly as he'd thought.

Krovas leaned forward and said placidly yet piercingly, "Granted you were so ordered, why were you spying into a room beyond this one when I spotted you?"

"We saw brave thieves flee from that room," the Mouser answered pat. "Fearing that some danger threatened the Guild, my comrade and I investigated, ready to scotch it."

"But what we saw and heard only perplexed us, great sir," Fafhrd appended quite smoothly.

"I didn't ask you, sot. Speak when you're spoken to," Krovas snapped at him. Then, to the Mouser, "You're an overweening rogue, most presumptuous for your rank. Beggars claim to protect thieves indeed! I'm of a mind to have you both flogged for your spying, and again for your drunkenness, aye, and once more for your lies."

In a flash the Mouser decided that further insolence—and lying, too—rather than fawning, was what the situation required. "I am a most presumptuous rogue indeed, sir," he said smugly. Then he set his face solemn. "But now I see the time has come when I must speak darkest truth entire. The Day Beggarmaster suspects a plot against your own life, sir, by one of your highest and closest lieutenants—one you trust so well you'd not believe it, sir. He told us that! So he set me and my comrade secretly to guard you and sniff out the verminous villain."

"More and clumsier lies!" Krovas snarled, but the Mouser saw his face grow pale. The Grandmaster half rose from his seat. "Which lieutenant?"

The Mouser grinned and relaxed. His two captors gazed sidewise at him curiously, loosing their grip a little. Fafhrd's pair seemed likewise intrigued.

The Mouser then asked coolly, "Are you questioning me as a trusty spy or a pinioned liar? If the latter, I'll not insult you with one more word."

Krovas' face darkened. "Boy!" he called. Through the curtains of an inner doorway, a youth with the dark complexion of a Kleshite and clad only in a black loincloth sprang to kneel before Krovas, who ordered, "Summon first my sorcerer, next the thieves Slevyas and Fissif," whereupon the dark youth dashed into the corridor.

Krovas hesitated a moment in thought, then shot a hand toward

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Fafhrd. "What do you know of this, drunkard? Do you support your mate's crazy tale?"

Fafhrd merely sneered his face and folded his arms, the still-slack grip of his captors permitting it, his sword-crutch hanging against his body from his lightly gripping hand. Then he scowled as there came a sudden shooting pain in his numbed, bound-up left leg, which he had forgotten.

Krovas raised a clenched fist and himself wholly from his chair, in prelude to some fearsome command—likely that Fafhrd and the Mouser be tortured, but at that moment Hristomilo came gliding into the room, his feet presumably taking swift, but very short steps—at any rate his black robe hung undisturbed to the marble floor despite his slithering speed.

There was a shock at his entance. All eyes in the map room followed him, breaths were held, and the Mouser and Fafhrd felt the horny hands that gripped them shake just a little. Even Krovas' tense expression became also guardedly uneasy.

Outwardly oblivious to this reaction to his apppearance, Hristomilo, smiling thin-lipped, halted close to one side of Krovas' chair and inclined his hood-shadowed rodent face in the ghost of a bow.

Krovas asked sharply yet nervously, gesturing toward the Mouser and Fafhrd, "Do you know these two?"

Hristomilo nodded decisively. "They just now peered a befuddled eye each at me," he said, "whilst I was about that business we spoke of. I'd have shooed them off, reported them, save such action would have broken my spell, put my words out of time with the alembic's workings. The one's a Northerner, the other's features have a southern cast—from Tovilyis or near, most like. Both younger than their now-looks. Freelance bravoes, I'd judge 'em, the sort the Brotherhood hires as extras when they get at once several big guard and escort jobs. Clumsily disguised now, of course,—as beggars."

Fafhrd by yawning, the Mouser by pitying headshake tried to convey that all this was so much poor guesswork. The Mouser even added a warning glare, brief as lightning, to suggest to Krovas that the conspiring lieutenant might be the Grandmaster's own sorcerer.

"That's all I can tell you without reading their minds," Hristomilo concluded. "Shall I fetch my lights and mirrors?"

"Not yet." Krovas faced the Mouser and said, "Now speak truth, or have it magicked from you and then be whipped to death. Which of my lieutenants were you set to spy on by the Day Beggarmaster? But you're lying about that commission, I believe?"

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"Oh, no," the Mouser denied it guilelessly. "We reported our every act to the Day Beggarmaster and he approved them, told us to spy our best and gather every scrap of fact and rumor we could about the conspiracy."

"And he told me not a word about it!" Krovas rapped out. "If true, I'll have Bannat's head for this! But you're lying, aren't you?"

As the Mouser gazed with wounded eyes at Krovas, a portly man limped past the doorway with help of a gilded staff. He moved with silence and aplomb.

But Krovas saw him. "Night Beggarmaster!" he called sharply. The limping man stopped, turned, came crippling majestically through the door. Krovas stabbed a finger at the Mouser, then Fafhrd. "Do you know these two, Flim?"

The Night Beggarmaster unhurriedly studied each for a space, then shook his head with its turban of cloth of gold. "Never seen either before. What are they? Fink beggars?"

"But Flim wouldn't know us," the Mouser explained desperately, feeling everything collapsing in on him and Fafhrd. "All our contacts were with Bannat alone."

Flim said quietly, "Bannat's been abed with the swamp ague this past ten-day. Meanwhile I have been Day Beggarmaster as well as Night."

At that moment Slevyas and Fissif came hurrying in behind Flim. The tall thief bore on his jaw a bluish lump. The fat thief's head was bandaged above his darting eyes. He pointed quickly at Fafhrd and the Mouser and cried, "There are the two that slugged us, took our Jengao loot, and slew our escort."

The Mouser lifted his elbow and the green bottle crashed to shards at his feet on the hard marble. Gardenia-reek sprang swiftly through the air.

But more swiftly still the Mouser, shaking off the careless hold of his startled guards, sprang toward Krovas, clubbing his wrapped-up sword.

With startling speed Flim thrust out his gilded staff, tripping the Mouser, who went heels over head, midway seeking to change his involuntary somersault into a voluntary one.

Meanwhile Fafhrd lurched heavily against his left-hand captor, at the same time swinging bandaged Graywand strongly upward to strike his right-hand captor under the jaw. Regaining his one-legged balance with a mighty contortion, he hopped for the loot-wall behind him.

Slevyas made for the wall of thieves' tools, and with a muscle-cracking effort wrenched the great pry-bar from its padlocked ring.

Scrambling to his feet after a poor landing in front of Krovas'

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chair, the Mouser found it empty and the Thief King in a half-crouch behind it, gold-hilted dagger drawn, deep-sunk eyes coldly battle-wild. Spinning around, he saw Fafhrd's guards on the floor, the one sprawled senseless, the other starting to scramble up, while the great Northerner, his back against the wall of weird jewelry, menaced the whole room with wrapped-up Graywand and with his long knife, jerked from its scabbard behind him.

Likewise drawing Cat's Claw, the Mouser cried in trumpet-voice of battle, "Stand aside, all! He's gone mad! I'll hamstring his good leg for you!" And racing through the press and between his own two guards, who still appeared to hold him in some awe, he launched himself with flashing dirk at Fafhrd, praying that the Northerner, drunk now with battle as well as wine and poisonous perfume, would recognize him and guess his stratagem.

Graywand slashed well above his ducking head. His new friend not only guessed, but was playing up—and not just missing by accident, the Mouser hoped. Stooping low by the wall, he cut the lashings on Fafhrd's left leg. Graywand and Fafhrd's long knife continued to spare him. Springing up, he headed for the corridor, crying overshoulder to Fafhrd, "Come on!"

Hristomilo stood well out of his way, quietly observing. Fissif scuttled toward safety. Krovas stayed behind his chair, shouting, "Stop them! Head them off!"

The three remaining ruffian guards, at last beginning to recover their fighting-wits, gathered to oppose the Mouser. But menacing them with swift feints of his dirk, he slowed them and darted between—and then just in the nick of time knocked aside with a downsweep of wrapped-up Scalpel Flim's gilded staff, thrust once again to trip him.

All this gave Slevyas time to return from the tools-wall and aim at the Mouser a great swinging blow with the massive pry-bar. But even as that blow started, a very long, bandaged and scabbarded sword on a very long arm thrust over the Mouser's shoulder and solidly and heavily poked Slevyas high on the chest, jolting him backwards, so that the pry-bar's swing was short and sung past harmlessly.

Then the Mouser found himself in the corridor and Fafhrd beside him, though for some weird reason still only hopping. The Mouser pointed toward the stairs. Fafhrd nodded, but delayed to reach high, still on one leg only, and rip off the nearest wall a dozen yards of heavy drapes, which he threw across the corridor to baffle pursuit.

They reached the stairs and started up the next flight, the

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Mouser in advance. There were cries behind, some muffled.

"Stop hopping, Fafhrd!" the Mouser ordered querulously. "You've got two legs again."

"Yes, and the other's still dead," Fafhrd complained. "Ahh! Now feeling begins to return to it."

A thrown knife whished between them and dully clinked as it hit the wall point-first and stone powder flew. Then they were around the bend.

Two more empty corridors, two more curving flights, and then they saw above them on the last landing a stout ladder mounting to a dark, square hole in the roof. A thief with hair bound back by a colorful handkerchief—it appeared to be the door guards' identification—menaced the Mouser with drawn sword, but when he saw that there were two of them, both charging him determinedly with shining knives and strange staves or clubs, he turned and ran down the last empty corridor.

The Mouser, followed closely by Fafhrd, rapidly mounted the ladder and vaulted up through the hatch into the star-crusted night.

He found himself near the unrailed edge of a slate roof which slanted enough to have made it look most fearsome to a novice roof-walker, but safe as houses to a veteran.

Turning back at a bumping sound, he saw Fafhrd prudently hoisting the ladder. Just as he got it free, a knife flashed up close past him out of the hatch.

It clattered down near them and slid off the roof. The Mouser loped south across the slates and was halfway from the hatch to that end of the roof when the faint chink came of the knife striking the cobbles of Murder Alley.

Fafhrd followed more slowly, in part perhaps from a lesser experience of roofs, in part because he still limped a bit to favor his left leg, and in part because he was carrying the heavy ladder balanced on his right shoulder.

"We won't need that," the Mouser called back.

Without hesitation Fafhrd heaved it joyously over the edge. By the time it crashed in Murder Alley, the Mouser was leaping down two yards and across a gap of one to the next roof, of opposite and lesser pitch. Fafhrd landed beside him.

The Mouser led them at almost a run through a sooty forest of chimneys, chimney pots, ventilators with tails that made them always face the wind, black-legged cisterns, hatch covers, bird houses, and pigeon traps across five roofs, until they reached the Street of the Thinkers at a point where it was crossed by a roofed passageway much like the one at Rokkermas and Slaarg's.

While they crossed it at a crouching lope, something hissed close past them and clattered

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ahead. As they leaped down from the roof of the bridge, three more somethings hissed over their heads to clatter beyond. One rebounded from a square chimney almost to the Mouser's feet. He picked it up, expecting a stone, and was surprised by the greater weight of a leaden ball big as two doubled-up fingers.

"They," he said, jerking thumb overshoulder, "lost no time in getting slingers on the roof. When roused, they're good."

Southeast then through another black chimney-forest toward a point on Cheap Street where upper stories overhung the street so much on either side that it would be easy to leap the gap. During this roof-traverse, an advancing front of night-smog, dense enough to make them cough and wheeze, engulfed them and for perhaps sixty heartbeats the Mouser had to slow to a shuffle and feel his way, Fafhrd's hand on his shoulder. Just short of Cheap Street they came abruptly and completely out of the smog and saw the stars again, while the black front rolled off northward behind them.

"Now what the devil was that?" Fafhrd asked and the Mouser shrugged.

A nighthawk would have seen a vast thick hoop of black night-smog blowing out in all directions from a center near the Silver Eel.

East of Cheap Street the two comrades soon made their way to the ground, landing back in Plague Court.

Then at last they looked at each other and their trammeled swords and their filthy faces and clothing made dirtier still by roof-soot, and they laughed and laughed and laughed, Fafhrd roaring still as he bent over to massage his left leg above and below knee. This hooting self-mockery continued while they unwrapped their swords—the Mouser as if his were a surprise package—and clipped their scabbards once more to their belts. Their exertions had burnt out of them the last mote and atomy of strong wine and even stronger stenchful perfume, but they felt no desire whatever for more drink, only the urge to get home and eat hugely and guzzle hot, bitter gahveh, and tell their lovely girls at length the tale of their mad adventure.

They loped on side by side.

Free of night-smog and drizzled with starlight, their cramped surroundings seemed much less stinking and oppressive than when they had set out. Even Bones Alley had a freshness to it.

They hastened up the long, creaking, broken-treaded stairs with an easy carefulness, and when they were both on the porch, the Mouser shoved at the door to open it with surprise-swiftness.

It did not budge.

"Bolted," he said to Fafhrd

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shortly. He noted now there was hardly any light at all coming through the cracks around the door, nor had any been noticeable through the lattices—at most, a faint orange-red glow. Then with sentimental grin and in fond voice in which only the ghost of uneasiness lurked, he said, "They've gone to sleep, the unworrying wenches!" He knocked loudly thrice and then cupping his lips called softly at the door crack, "Hola, Ivrian! I'm home safe. Hail, Vlana! Your man's done you proud, felling Guild-thieves innumerable with one foot tied behind his back!"

There was no sound whatever from inside—that is, if one discounted a rustling so faint it was impossible to be sure of it.

Fafhrd was wrinkling his nostrils. "I smell vermin."

The Mouser banged on the door again. Still no response.

Fafhrd motioned him out of the way, hunching his big shoulder to crash the portal.

The Mouser shook his head and with a deft tap, slide, and a tug removed a brick that a moment before had looked to be a firm-set part of the wall beside the door. He reached in all his arm. There was the scrape of a bolt being withdrawn, then another, then a third. He swiftly recovered his arm and the door swung fully inward at touch.

But neither he nor Fafhrd rushed in at once, as both had intended to, for the indefinable scent of danger and the unknown came puffing out along with an increased reek of filthy beast and a slight, sickening sweet scent that though female was no decent female perfume.

They could see the room faintly by the orange glow coming from the small oblong of the open door of the little, well-blacked stove. Yet the oblong did not sit properly upright but was unnaturally a-tilt—clearly the stove had been half overset and now leaned against a side wall of the fireplace, its small door fallen open in that direction.

By itself alone, that unnatural angle conveyed the entire impact of a universe overturned.

The orange glow showed the carpets oddly rucked up with here and there ragged black circles a palm's breadth across, the neatly stacked candles scattered about below their shelves along with some of the jars and enameled boxes, and—above all—two black, low, irregular, longish heaps, the one by the fireplace, the other half on the golden couch, half at its foot.

From each heap there stared at the Mouser and Fafhrd innumerable pairs of tiny, rather widely set, furnace-red eyes.

On the thickly carpeted floor on the other side of the fireplace was a silver cobweb—a fallen sil-

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ver cage, but no love birds sang from it.

There was the faint scrape of metal as Fafhrd made sure Graywand was loose in his scabbard.

As if that tiny sound had beforehand been chosen as the signal for attack, each instantly whipped out sword and they advanced side by side into the room, warily at first, testing the floor with each step.

At the screech of the swords being drawn, the tiny furnace-red eyes had winked and shifted restlessly, and now with the two *men's approach they swiftly* scattered pattering, pair by red pair, each pair at the forward end of a small, low, slender, hairless-tailed black body, and each making for one of the black circles in the rugs, where they vanished.

Indubitably the black circles were ratholes newly gnawed up through the floor and rugs, while the red-eyed creatures were black rats.

Fafhrd and the Mouser sprang forward, slashing and chopping at them in a frenzy, cursing and human-snarling besides.

They sundered few. The rats fled with preternatural swiftness, most of them disappearing down holes near the walls and the fireplace.

Also Fafhrd's first frantic chop went through the floor and on his *third step, with an ominous* crack and splintering, his leg plunged through the floor to his hip. The Mouser darted past him, unmindful of further crackings.

Fafhrd heaved out his trapped leg, not even noting the splinter-scratches it got and as unmindful as the Mouser of the continuing creakings. The rats were gone. He lunged after his comrade, who had thrust a bunch of kindlers into the stove, to make more light.

The horror was that, although the rats were all gone, the two longish heaps remained, although considerably diminished and, as now shown clearly by the yellow flames leaping from the tilted black door, changed in hue—no longer were the heaps red-beaded black, but a mixture of gleaming black and dark brown, a sickening purple-blue, violet and velvet black and snow-serpent white, and the reds of stockings and blood and bloody flesh and bone.

Although hands and feet had been gnawed bone-naked, and bodies tunneled heart-deep, the two faces had been spared. But that was not good, for they were the parts purple-blue from death by strangulation, lips drawn back, eyes bulging, all features contorted in agony. Only the black and very dark brown hair gleamed unchanged—that and the white, white teeth.

As each man stared down at his love, unable to look away despite the waves of horror and grief and rage washing higher and

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higher in him, each saw a tiny black strand uncurl from the black depression ringing each throat and drift off, dissipating, toward the open door behind them—two strands of night-smog.

With a crescendo of crackings the floor sagged three spans more in the center before arriving at a new temporary stability.

Edges of centrally tortured minds noted details: That Vlana's silver-hilted dagger skewered to the floor a rat, which, likely enough, overeager had approached too closely before the night-smog had done its magic work. That her belt and pouch were gone. That the blue-enameled box inlaid with silver, in which Ivrian had put the Mouser's share of the high-jacked jewels, was gone too.

The Mouser and Fafhrd lifted to each other white, drawn faces which were quite mad, yet completely joined in understanding and purpose. No need for Fafhrd to explain why he stripped off his robe and hood, or why he jerked up Vlana's dagger, snapped the rat off it with a wrist-flick, and thrust it in his belt. No need for the Mouser to tell why he searched out a half dozen jars of oil and after smashing three of them in front of the flaming stove, paused, thought, and stuck the other three in the sack at his waist, adding to them the remaining kindlers and the fire-pot, brimmed with red coals, its top lashed down tight.

Then, still without word exchanged, the Mouser reached into the fireplace and without a wince at the burning metal's touch, deliberately tipped the flaming stove forward, so that it fell door-down on oil-soaked rugs. Yellow flames sprang up around him.

They turned and raced for the door. With louder crackings than any before, the floor collapsed. They desperately scrambled their way up a steep hill of sliding carpets and reached door and porch just before all behind them gave way and the flaming rugs and stove and all the firewood and candles and the golden couch and all the little tables and boxes and jars—and the unthinkably mutilated bodies of their first loves—cascaded into the dry, dusty, cobweb-choked room below, and the great flames of a cleansing or at least obliterating cremation began to flare upward.

They plunged down the stairs, which tore away from the wall and collapsed in the dark as they reached the ground. They had to fight their way over the wreckage to get to Bones Alley.

By then flames were darting their bright lizard-tongues out of the shuttered attic windows and the boarded-up ones in the story just below. By the time they reached Plague Court, running side by side at top speed, the Silver Eel's fire alarm was clanging cacophonously behind them.

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They were still sprinting when they took the Death Alley fork. Then the Mouser grappled Fafhrd and forced him to a halt. The big man struck out, cursing insanely, and only desisted—his white face still a lunatic's—when the Mouser cried panting, "Only ten heartbeats to arm us!"

He pulled the sack from his belt and keeping tight hold of its neck, crashed it on the cobbles—hard enough to smash not only the bottles of oil, but also the fire-pot, for the sack was soon flaming at its base.

Then he drew gleaming Scalpel and Fafhrd Graywand, and they raced on, the Mouser swinging his sack in a great circle beside him to fan its flames. It was a veritable ball of fire burning his left hand as they dashed across Cheap Street and into Thieves' House, and the Mouser, leaping high, swung it up into the great niche above the doorway and let go of it.

The niche-guards screeched in surprise and pain at the fiery invader of their hidey-hole.

Student thieves poured out of the doors ahead at the screeching and foot-pounding, and then poured back as they saw the fierce point of flames and the two demon-faced on-comers brandishing their long, shining swords.

One skinny little apprentice—he could hardly have been ten years old—lingered too long. Graywand thrust him pitilessly through, as his big eyes bulged and his small mouth gaped in horror and plea to Fafhrd for mercy.

Now from ahead of them there came a weird, wailing call, hollow and hair-raising, and doors began to thud shut instead of spewing forth the armed guards Fafhrd and the Mouser prayed would appear to be skewered by their swords. Also, despite the long, bracketed torches looking newly renewed, the corridor was darkening.

The reason for this last became clear as they plunged up the stairs. Strands of night-smog appeared in the stairwell, materializing from nothing, or the air.

The strands grew longer and more tangible. They touched and clung nastily. In the corridor above they were forming from wall to wall and from ceiling to floor, like a gigantic cobweb, and were becoming so substantial that the Mouser and Fafhrd had to slash them to get through, or so their two maniac minds believed. The black web muffled a little a repetition of the eerie, wailing call, which came from the seventh door ahead and this time ended in a gleeful chittering and cackling as insane as the emotions of the two attackers.

Here, too, doors were thudding shut. In an ephemeral flash of rationality, it occurred to the Mouser that it was not he and

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Fafhrd the thieves feared, for they had not been seen yet, but rather Hristomilo and his magic, even though working in defense of Thieves' House.

Even the map room, whence counterattack would most likely erupt, was closed off by a huge oaken, iron-studded door.

They were now twice slashing the black, clinging, rope-thick spiderweb for every single step they drove themselves forward. While midway between the map and magic rooms, there was forming on the inky web, ghostly at first but swiftly growing more substantial, a black spider as big as a wolf.

The Mouser slashed heavy cobweb before it, dropped back two steps, then hurled himself at it in a high leap. Scalpel thrust through it, striking amidst its eight new-formed jet eyes, and it collapsed like a daggered bladder, loosing a vile stink.

Then he and Fafhrd were looking into the magic room, the alchemist's chamber. It was much as they had seen it before, except some things were doubled, or multiplied even further.

On the long table two blue-boiled cucurbits bubbled and roiled, their heads shooting out a solid, writhing rope more swiftly than moves the black swamp-cobra, which can run down a man —and not into twin receivers, but into the open air of the room (if any of the air in Thieves' House could have been called open then) to weave a barrier between their swords and Hristomilo, who once more stood tall though hunch-backed over his sorcerous, brown parchment, though this time his exultant gaze was chiefly fixed on Fafhrd and the Mouser, with only an occasional downward glance at the text of the spell he drummingly intoned.

While at the other end of the table, in web-free space, there bounced not only Slivikin, but also a huge rat matching him in size in all members except the head.

From the ratholes at the foot of the walls, red eyes glittered and gleamed in pairs.

With a bellow of rage Fafhrd began slashing at the black barrier, but the ropes were replaced from the cucurbit heads as swiftly as he sliced them, while the cut ends, instead of drooping slackly, now began to strain hungrily toward him like constrictive snakes or strangle-vines.

He suddenly shifted Graywand to his left hand, drew his long knife and hurled it at the sorcerer. Flashing toward its mark, it cut through three strands, was deflected and slowed by a fourth and fifth, almost halted by a sixth, and ended hanging futilely in the curled grip of a seventh.

Hristomilo laughed cacklingly and grinned, showing his huge upper incisors, while Slivikin

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chittered in ecstasy and bounded the higher.

The Mouser hurled Cat's Claw with no better result—worse, indeed, since his action gave two darting smog-strands time to curl hamperingly around his sword-hand and stranglingly around his neck. Black rats came racing out of the big holes at the cluttered base of the walls.

Meanwhile other strands snaked around Fafhrd's ankles, knees and left arm, almost toppling him. But even as he fought for balance, he jerked Vlana's dagger from his belt and raised it over his shoulder, its silver hilt glowing, its blade brown with dried rat's-blood.

The grin left Hristomilo's face as he saw it. The sorcerer screamed strangely and importunningly then, and drew back from his parchment and the table, and raised clawed clubhands to ward off doom.

Vlana's dagger sped unimpeded through the black web—its strands even seemed to part for it—and betwixt the sorcerer's warding hands, to bury itself to the hilt in his right eye.

He screamed thinly in dire agony and clawed at his face.

The black web writhed as if in death spasm.

The cucurbits shattered as one, spilling their lava on the scarred table, putting out the blue flames even as the thick wood of the table began to smoke a little at the lava's edge. Lava dropped with *plops* on the dark marble floor.

With a faint, final scream Hristomilo pitched forward, hands clutched to his eyes above his jutting nose, silver dagger-hilt protruding between his fingers.

The web grew faint, like wet ink washed with a gush of clear water.

The Mouser raced forward and transfixed Slivikin and the huge rat with one thrust of Scalpel before the beasts knew what was happening. They too died swiftly with thin screams, while all the other rats turned tail and fled back down their holes swift almost as black lightning.

Then the last trace of night-smog or sorcery-smoke vanished, and Fafhrd and the Mouser found themselves standing alone with three dead bodies amidst a profound silence that seemed to fill not only this room but all Thieves' House. Even the cucurbit-lava had ceased to move, was hardening, and the wood of the table no longer smoked.

Their madness was gone and all their rage, too—vented to the last red atomy and glutted to more than satiety. They had no more urge to kill Krovas or any other thieves than to swat flies. With horrified inner-eye Fafhrd saw the pitiful face of the child-thief he'd skewered in his lunatic anger.

Only their grief remained with

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them, diminished not one whit, but rather growing greater—that and an ever more swiftly growing revulsion from all that was around them: the dead, the disordered magic room, all Thieves' House, all of the city of Lankhmar to its last stinking alleyway.

With a hiss of disgust the Mouser jerked Scalpel from the rodent cadavers, wiped it on the nearest cloth, and returned it to its scabbard. Fafhrd likewise sketchily cleansed and sheathed Graywand. Then the two men picked up their knife and dirk from where they'd dropped to the floor when the web had dematerialized, though neither glanced at Vlana's dagger where it was buried. But on the sorcerer's table they did notice Vlana's black velvet, silver-worked pouch and belt, and Ivrian's blue-enameled box inlaid with silver. These they took.

With no more word than they had exchanged back at the Mouser's burnt nest behind the Eel, but with a continuing sense of their unity of purpose, their identity of intent, and of their comradeship, they made their way with shoulders bowed and with slow, weary steps which only very gradually quickened out of the magic room and down the thick-carpeted corridor, past the map room's wide door now barred with oak and iron, and past all the other shut, silent doors, down the echoing stairs, their footsteps speeding a little; down the bare-floored lower corridor past its closed, quiet doors, their footsteps resounding loudly no matter how softly they sought to tread; under the deserted, black-scorched guard-niche, and so out into Cheap Street, turning left and north because that was the nearest way to the Street of the Gods, and there turning right and east—not a waking soul in the wide street except for one skinny, bent-backed apprentice lad unhappily swabbing the flagstones in front of a wine shop in the dim pink light beginning to seep from the east, although there were many forms asleep, a-snore and a-dream in the gutters and under the dark porticoes—yes, turning right and east down the Street of the Gods, for that way was the Marsh Gate, leading to Causey Road across the Great Salt Marsh; and the Marsh Gate was the nearest way out of the great and glamorous city that was now loathsome to them, a city of beloved, unfaceable ghosts—indeed, not to be endured for one more stabbing, leaden heartbeat than was necessary.

THIS MONTH'S COVER is a head-on view of the north face of our galaxy from a hypothetical planet without atmosphere 400,000 light years out. Our sun is indicated by a red star about ⅓ up from the center of the greenish nucleus. The patches of light are star clouds. The black patches are cosmic dust.

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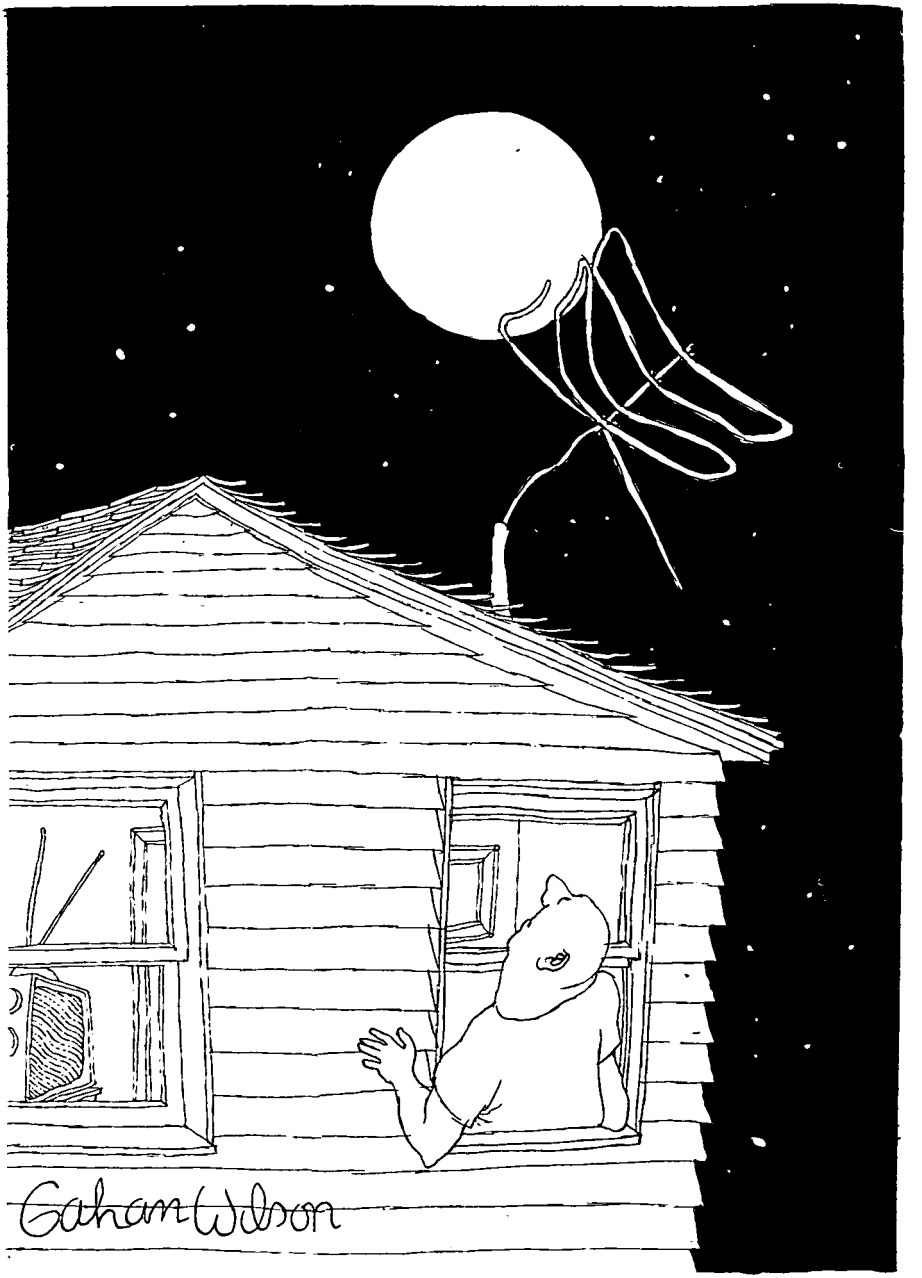

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BOOKS

Edward Lucie-Smith, ed.: HOLDING YOUR EIGHT HANDS; AN ANTHOLOGY OF SCIENCE-FICTION VERSE. Doubleday, N. Y., 1969; xix + 120 pp., paper, $1.95.

It has always been my impression that "science-fiction verse" fell in three categories: (1) The gluey, incompetent, embarrassing stuff that is published in fan magazines; (2) the verse quoted by poet-characters in science-fiction stories, which is not much better; and (3) the occasional filler in *F&SF*, ordinarily competent enough but conventional in both form and content.

This volume shows my impression to have been quite wrong: I have not been paying attention. True, it contains some dubious or outright bad specimens, but even the bad ones are bad in unexpected ways; only two are horrible fanzine verse, both of them by H. P. Lovecraft. John Robert Colombo, for example, is represented by a verbatim quotation from Mary Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN, rearranged as free verse. I deduce from his biographical note that this is something he calls "found poetry," but I call it plagiarism. Adrian Henri is included with three brief snippets dedicated to Lovecraft, Bradbury and Bester which do nothing but push about pieces of these authors' preoccupations, making them sound a good deal sillier than their originals. There are several quite long pieces which are actually one-punch short stories, and one of these, by Peter Redgrove, is not even set up as a poem; the other, by Edwin Morgan, is; but I can't see why—but both are pretty good stories. Kenneth Koch's *The Artist* is also a story, a satire on the current mania for gigantism in the plastic arts, which *is* also a poem in the same sense that William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* is: a welding together of journal entries, headlines, honest verse, half-bricks, broken bottles and old bones which does in the end turn out to have a coherent vision.

Far at the other end of the spectrum is George MacBeth's *Circe Undersea,* which is a narrative poem told in a series of seven sonnets, with marginal glosses; a tour de force of beautifully vis-

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ualized, unconventional material worked with apparent ease into a rigidly conventional frame. Another MacBeth poem, *The Crab-Apple Crisis,* succeeds in making Hermann Kahn funny, which I would have thought impossible on the face of it.

Quite a few of the poems belong to a class which, lacking any standard critical term for it, I call the rhymed editorial. Most of the work of W. H. Auden is of this kind, and it makes me acutely uncomfortable the more I agree with its content; while I sympathize with almost all of Auden's attitudes, I can see no more compelling reason to call most of his verse "poetry" than I can for the short story which has been broken up into what purports to be verse. Nevertheless, most of the work in this collection which falls into this class shows that the writers know Auden exists and that they have learned from him.

There are also some epiphanies —moments of intense realization, intensely expressed, and implying some previous situation which the poet does not tell you. The epiphany is the heartland of poetry, but it is not surprising that there are not many in this collection. And so it is not surprising that there are even fewer lyrics, and almost *no* single lines which you are likely to remember. In fact, the only irruption of outright song that I could find is abstract and Eliotian: ". . . our lives and days returned to us, but / haunted by deeper souvenirs than any rocks or seeds. / From time the souvenirs are deeds." (Edwin Morgan) This is fine in the same sense that "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" is fine, but it is a bloodless sort of lyricism not far removed from the prosy; Poul Anderson has tossed off lines just as good in straight stories (e.g., "Time is the bridge that burns behind us"). Ah, well, it is no doubt a little early in the game for good s-f lyrics.

Poets included here whose names will be known to most or some—science-fiction readers—include Brian W. Aldiss, John Brunner, John Ciardi, Robert Conquest, Thomas M. Disch, C. S. Lewis, H. P. Lovecraft and John Sladek. Judging them solely and unfairly from these samples, all but Ciardi seem to suffer from the notion that poetry can be a minor hobby, though there are signs in Aldiss' one contribution that he knows better; and one of Brunner's two (both from STAND ON ZANZIBAR) is given here with two crucial errors.

If you like poetry and know something about it, this volume will be a pleasant surprise . . . or perhaps even an unepected doorway into the art.

Roger Zelazny: CREATURES OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS. Double-

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day, N. Y., 1969; 187 pp., boards, $4.50.

The publication of Joyce's ULYSSES in 1924 prompted T. S. Eliot to suggest that for the modern novel in general, myth might prove an acceptable replacement for poetic structure or plot. In our field, we saw a lot of use of myth in the *Unknown* era—Pratt/de Camp come to mind at once—but these stories were games. It has remained for the New Wave writers, some 45 years later, to catch up with Eliot's proposal. Lately we have seen Chip Delany (to whom the present novel is dedicated, not, I think, "Just Because") and Michael Moorcock take on the Christ myth; Zelazny in LORD OF LIGHT adopted Hindu mythology, and Greek in THIS IMMORTAL; and Emil Petaja has been hashing his way through the Finnish *Kalevala* . . . all in dead earnest.

CREATURES OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS tries to turn Egyptian mythology into a serious science-fiction novel. Despite some good passages, I think it is a flat failure.

It is a failure in conception. No excuse at all is offered for its primary assumption that the Egyptian gods were real creatures with real power to control the universe of experience, for the lack of any evidence for this in thousands of years of real Egyptian writings about them, or for their survival as creatures of power into the very far future. The notion is utterly arbitrary; a cute notion is all it is.

It is ignorant and inconsistent. The personifications of the gods in Zelazny's hands are undignified, stupid, uncharacteristic and anti-historical. Creatures from other mythologies (e.g., the Norns, Cerebus, the Minotaur) are shoved in at random, as are several which are apparently Zelazny inventions. One of the inventions is an ineducable immortal called the Steel General with a fix on lost causes, who owns a mechanical horse which dances senselessly up and down and pulverizes the landscape whenever his master gets into a fight.

Stylistically, it is a hash. Some parts are evocative in the authentic and unique Zelazny manner, but he cannot sustain the tone; the gods call each other "Dad," and a speech that starts out with thee's and thou's winds up with "ambulance-chaser;" a 411-word sentence describing a dead city, intended to be hypnotic, is killed before it starts by the arch instruction, "Color it dust." There are moments of authentic comedy, such as the tentative prayers of Madrak ("Thank you, Dad") to Whomever may or may not be listening, but most of the putative humor is at the Batman level and seems just as dated.

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Moreover, this is another of those recently multiplying novels of apparatus, told in bits and scraps, zigzagging among viewpoints and tenses, and dropping into quotations or verse for no reason beyond an apparent desire to seem experimental or impressive. The book ends in dramatic form—that is, as a section from a play—with a scene which absolutely demands straightforward, standard narrative and for which the playscript is the worst possible choice.

Beyond these blemishes, there is an important theoretical misconception here. As Darko Suvin has noted, the displacements from the world of experience involved in myth attempt to explain that world in terms of eternal forces which are changeless; the attempt is antithetical to the suppositions of science fiction, which center around the potentialities of continuous change. Once one invokes such great names as Anubis, Osiris and Thoth, one willy-nilly also invokes the whole complex of associations which goes with them, the static assumptions of a fixed cosmos about which everything important is already known. You are writing an allegory whether you want to or not, and if you don't even realize that this is the problem, the end product is bound to ring false.

This is the third time Zelazny has fallen into this trap, and this time around it seems to have put his self-critical sense completely to sleep. One more like this, and the late Leroy Tanner will have justified his existence after all.

George Macdonald: LILITH. Ballantine Books, N. Y., 1969; x + 275 pp., paper, 95¢.

This is a reprint; the original, written in 1895, is long out of print. Various respected moderns have compared MacDonald to Bunyan, Kafka, Novalis and Poe, and the modern reader will see that LILITH in turn considerably influenced C. S. Lewis' "Narnia" books. Lin Carter's introduction notes that Lewis Carroll was encouraged by MacDonald to publish ALICE.

With all these clues, it comes as no surprise to find that the adventure begins with a passage through a mirror, that talking animals and children play a large part in it, and that it is a religious allegory cast as a fairy tale. Curiously, considering that MacDonald was a devout Congregationalist all his long adult life, it is much less markedly a Christian allegory than are PILGRIM'S PROGRESS or THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE, probably because the strict Calvinism in which MacDonald was raised said that Christ predestined who was to be saved and who damned.

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Whatever the reason, the viewpoint character is a lonely young Oxford graduate, a student of what we would now call the history of science, symbolically named Vane (an obvious precursor of Lewis' Ransom). Also present are Adam and Eve of the Old Testament (the former first appearing as a ghostly librarian in our world, then as a talking raven, then as the sexton of the dead awaiting the Resurrection); and the Lilith of the Apocrypha (who can appear as a leopardess and summon a great army of cats, whom MacDonald did not seem to like very much). Satan also appears, but does not speak, as a Shadow; and there is a child-bride figure named Lona (an odd foreshadowing of Carroll's Alice Liddell).

MacDonald does not funk his allegory at any point. The main plot revolves around the redemption of Lilith, paralleling the pilgrim's progress of Mr. Vane; and by the end—as at the end of the "Narnia" series—we are well launched into the Resurrection. However, the allegory is far from obtrusive, and the story proper both tense and decidedly eerie. The book is one of the great originals. In its light, some of the derivations we most admire look rather pallid.

Jack Vance: EIGHT FANTASMS AND MAGICS. Macmillan, N. Y., 1969; 288 pp., boards, $5.95.

Macmillan calls this "a science fiction adventure," but as the main title honestly shows, it is a collection of eight of Vance's fantasies, mostly dealing with the paranormal, and ranging in date from 1950 to 1969. One, "Cil," is an episode from EYES OF THE OVERWORLD; another, "The New Prime," has been resurrected from Damon Knight's lamented two-issue magazine, *Worlds Beyond;* and another, "Guyal of Sfere," is from Vance's rare early collection, THE DYING EARTH.

The old stories show that Vance's marvelous feeling for the telling of sensual detail, his incantatory tone, his muted humor, his rather arcane vocabulary, his ear for exactly the right proper names, his love for the medieval and for anachronisms in general—in short, the qualities which made THE DRAGON MASTERS unique and beautiful—have been with him almost from the beginning. Moreover, having this much Vance to read at a stretch (this is quite a long collection) makes it plain that his overall tone never fails; he never kills a sentence, never spoils a rhythm, never betrays an invention or a character, never falsifies his historical or mythological underpinnings. Some of the newer stories in this book are too short to show

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him at his best as a stylist, and are minor in idea, too; but such long pieces as "The Miracle Workers" and "Telek" are the prime product.

By my admittedly narrow definitions, these stories are none of them science fiction, unless by courtesy. They are, however, logical fantasies in the best of that tradition, exquisitely formed, and offered with the modesty of a master who does not need to distract the reader by showing off. I've read most of them before, I'll read them many times again, and so will you.

Dan Morgan: THE NEW MINDS. Avon Books, N. Y., 1969; 192 pp., paper, 75¢. THE SEVERAL MINDS. 190 pp., 75¢.

The first of these novels was called THE SIXTH PERCEPTION in England; the confusion of the retitling is confounded by the fact that the covers are also almost identical. But it doesn't greatly matter if you start with the second one, for it devotes considerable space to recapitulating the first, and in the process giving the first about as much space as it ever actually deserved.

Moreover, even if you read them in order, you will quickly become aware that you've seen it all before, anyhow. I don't understand the British compulsion for doing the story of psi discovery and development over and over, but here it is again. The first volume begins with the undeveloped wild talent, and the Rhine-like scientist investigating it with an electroencephalograph, as in *Let the Finder Beware!* (1949), and proceeds to the formation of a secret telepathic community, like *In Hiding* (1948). In the second volume, the dominant member of the group is an infant, as in *Baby is Three* (1952). No improvement has been made on the originals, and indeed Morgan's version of the baby part is measurably weaker than Sturgeon's. Even the complication—the scientist's wife is a nympho, and the group is threatened by a telepathic villain who is a Casanova—seems indebted to *When You're Smiling* (1955).

Ordinarily, I think such influence-detecting to be a waste of time, and when abused—as it has been in s-f at great length—it is pernicious. But the first three novelettes I have cited above were turned by their authors into well-known novels, at least two of which are still in print, and it seems highly unlikely that Morgan doesn't know them; of what use is it to write two more long novels which simply dilute these predecessors? Whatever the answer to that, there is clearly nothing to be gained by reading them. Avoid them.

—JAMES BLISH

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Like Charles Runyon's first two stories for us (SWEET HELEN, *September 1969;* DREAM PATROL, *February 1970*) *this latest one is built around a sexual theme. In other respects it is quite different from either of the others (which were deep-space dramas). The story below is, among other things, a contemporary horror tale and a strong one, not recommended for the squeamish.*

SOULMATE

by Charles W. Runyon

ANNE WAS THINKING. NOT *about* anything, really, just brain-swirls of contentment while her china-blue eyes roved the desert waste through which her husband-of-a-day was driving. Beneath her contentment lay the usual snarled knot of worry which artfully obscured the black nothingness at the core of her being.

Car, *nice*. Her right hand stroked the white enamel of the door. New Ferrari, the most expensive model. She felt annoyed at the gray dust which curved up behind the car like breaking surf. She felt it sifting down on her forearms, gathering in the whorls of her ears, coating each ash-blonde hair. She'd have to wash it tonight before she—before *they* went to bed. Dirk had wanted to spend their first night in the house where he'd been born.

"I *love* the desert," she said, throwing back her head, wondering if the blue veins showed beneath her jaws—but it was either that or drop her chin and allow those ugly, crinkled pouches to appear. Trouble with being forty, you had to think all the time, keep the muscles lithe, the skin vibrant, teeth clean, eyes fresh, breasts firm, stomach flat and buttocks muscular—and each year you could see that despite all your efforts you'd lost a little more. Maybe now she could relax and just let the old shell go to hell. She held up her left hand and let the sun catch the blue-white solitaire of her diamond engagement ring. Genuine, two-carat. She'd had it appraised the day after Dirk had given it to her. No more phonies like . . . what was his name, Bill? For a cheap zircon she'd wasted a week in a crummy hunting lodge with all the spiders and

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grandaddy-long-legs and had mouthed those sickening sentimentalities while enduring the boar-hog rootings which Bill mistook for virility, always culminating in a flatulent but fortunately brief frenzy of copulation. She had plotted to push him off a cliff as soon as she discovered his deceit, but that had been a waste of time, and time was growing short. She liked to recall the words of the young college professor who told her, in trembling tones, on the day she closed the book on their little game: "Each disappointment is the end of an illusion. I thank you, Anne, for a truly educational experience."

This one, so far, seemed right. There was the circlet on her finger, platinum band encircled by half-carat diamonds (she hadn't bothered to have them appraised), marriage license purchased, signed, and countersigned by the preacher—a Methodist, or Christian—one of those gray center-of-the-road groups, anyway. And of course Dirk's signature matched the one on his driver's license, she'd checked into that too . . .

It couldn't go wrong, this time. How could it? Everything had been checked and double-checked. His identity, his age (twenty-three, old enough to know what he wanted, she thought), his financial status (she had seen a $1000.00 check his lawyer had sent, supposedly for a month's subsistence while he was in college). That had made her wonder if his money might not be in an untouchable trust fund, like Verne's. (She forced her mind to skate quickly over the name, not going deeply enough to stir the rotten stench which lay beneath the surface.) And so she'd paid a visit to the lawyer, who turned out to be one of those brilliant, amoral young men whose eyes fixed her like a bug on a pin and made her feel as though the stink of her bowels had somehow broken loose in the draped, empaneled room. "I'll tell you this much, Miss Pirtle. Dirk Van Dieman is the sole possessor of a huge fortune securely placed in blue chips, government bonds, and real estate. I'm wondering what he would do if he were apprised of your inquiry." For a moment Anne had felt the cold knife of fear stab her stomach, but then she recovered and said, "It might depress him, and cause me to spend a small effort convincing him that you had deliberately misrepresented the situation." She allowed herself a faint smile as she lifted her hands and casually turned the phony zircon ring. "I expect to be his wife for a long time. If we can't . . . reach an understanding, then eventually I shall have to find somebody else." For a minute he looked at her, his chin resting on his laced fingers.

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Then, with an agility she understood perfectly, he fixed her a Scotch-on-the-rocks, and told her as one friend to another (or two jackals, she thought, who decide the corpse is big enough for both) that Dirk's great-great-grandfather had made a diamond strike in South Africa . . . that his great-grandfather had gone to Arizona to raise cattle, had found gold, and built himself a palace on the desert. Always the earth had yielded up its wealth. The grandfather had struck oil in Sumatra while trying to raise pepper trees; Dirk's father had unearthed Uranium in Utah, and the family fortune now approached a half-billion dollars. Anne, her head swimming from the drinks and visions of a dollar sign followed by innumerable zeros, had been indifferent to the lawyer's hand on her silken knee until she saw his eyes and realized that his motive was neither love nor desire, but power. As she rose to go he said diffidently, standing behind his desk, "It might have been fun, anyway." She turned with her hand on the door and smiled at his blind, masculine conceit. "Would you consider it fun to go to court and defend a drunk, without pay?" "No," he said, half smiling. "I see what you mean." It was not the victory she craved, and so she had smiled at him, posing in a manner which she knew accented the thrust of her breasts and the curve of her buttocks. When the candle of true desire had flared in his eyes, she opened the polished oaken door and walked out.

The lawyer was, as she had known at the time, thoroughly intimidated, and no word of their interview reached Dirk's ears. Their courtship progressed from talk of music, philosophy, and literature, to talk of themselves, their hopes, fears and dreams until at times Anne felt her stomach drawn into knots while the sour taste of vomit nudged at her cardiac sphincter. Dirk was incredibly polished: he opened doors for her, he took her coat from her shoulders with artful ease, he held her chair, he lit her cigarettes, he did all the right things at the right time. He was an incredibly handsome, intelligent, total bore.

He was also worth around $450,000,000.

"I'm trying to see you as a boy, Dirk." Sitting across the table from him, her chin resting on her hands, her whole countenance, she knew, bathed in a misty radiance, her eyes wide with girlish wonder. "Those summer camps you went to, I suppose you caught frogs, snakes, insects, swam and went boating, things like that."

"We collected insects, killed them with chloroform, and stuck them on a board. I won a prize for the best collection."

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"Were you always best?"

"Of course. There was no reason to be otherwise."

He smiled faintly at her, pouring her another glass of champagne. She drank and looked at the chiseled perfection of his face, the jutting chin, the long straight nose, the brown eyes large and long-lashed. His hair made her think of butter and honey. From some distant dreamtime of her youth came the thought of God, and what would have happened if He had decided one day to make a perfect man. Yet if Dirk was perfection, why should she feel such fury toward him? Why should she, while smilingly drinking, think with such exquisite pleasure of breaking her glass off just below the stem and driving the jagged point into his throat? *And of course, my dear Anne, that would be exactly like taking four hundred and fifty million dollars and throwing it into the fire.*

Dancing with him, she felt the length of his graceful body against hers. He danced beautifully. Of course. Tutored in Europe, educated in the finest schools, matured by travel and acquaintance with the world's great and near-great. Nothing had been left out. *Nothing?* She wondered, let her pelvic region thrust forward, not brazenly, but so casually that she could pretend it was an accident, and found—yes! The response was perfectly timed, his hard, stallion rigidity probed, seeking her softness. Of course there were several layers of fabric between them, and she didn't dare look into his eyes because her own knowledge might be revealed to him—but she heard the music stop and felt him clutch her to him once more, then walk with her to the table. She expected him to suggest going to a private place . . .

Instead, he sat down across the table from her, eyed her for a moment, and then asked:

"What do you want, Anne?"

Something inside her curled away from his eyes, twisting and turning as it tried to conceal from him the blackness within her, the foul and loathsome void which she had discovered years before.

She looked down at her hands and decided there was nothing wrong with letting her confusion show. It was real, and the blush rising up her throat—that was also real . . .

"I can't say, Dirk. I'm a woman, I guess, I want—"

"You want to marry me?"

Again the terrible, frightening urge to slash and kill. You perfect son-of-a-bitch! You conceited Adonis. You smug, self-assured, sack of sh—

Stifle it. Pretend . . . no, transform the rage, let it rise into your face, not as anger, but something else, good and true and fine.

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Now it was coming, her eyes brimmed with tears from the effort of holding on; the tight anger constricted her throat so that her voice came out warm and husky as she looked up at him through her lashes:

"Are you proposing to me, Dirk?"

For a moment his eyes glittered. She thought he was laughing at her, but then he leaned forward and took her hand. "Yes, Anne. I want you . . ." His eyes bored into hers, "to be my wife. Will you?"

"Dirk, I—" I want to vomit. Oh, Lord. What's the matter with me? Here it is, everything I've always wanted, laid out before me . . . "I suppose I . . . should ask for time to think it over, but I . . . I know how I feel about you, and—" Oh, God, my belly hurts. "My answer is yes."

"Til death do us part, Anne?"

Death? Oh, no. Tightly clench the anal sphincter, you know how it's done, Anne. You can control. "Til death do us part, Dirk. Forever and ever."

And then it was over. The sickness passed. Thirty minutes later she stood in the ladies' room and admired the ring he had placed upon her finger, hearing the sound of laughter from the club and remembering how Dirk had stopped the band and stood her up before them and announced their engagement (setting the date of the marriage for a week hence) and with a flourish ordered champagne to be brought to all the tables. The management had miraculously brought out paper hats and confetti, and Anne, recalling that the ring had been in his pocket, had felt suddenly like someone who has been sitting behind the wheel of a car for a long time, only to discover that her controls have been disconnected, and someone in the back seat was actually driving . . .

But it's what I want. So what does it matter who's in charge?

Still she excused herself early and said good-night to Dirk on her doorstep, controlling herself for one more mini-second to say with extreme tenderness, looking into his eyes from darkness and feeling confident now because the wrinkles around her eyes were invisible:

"It's been so exciting," she said. "I want to just . . . be alone for a while and think about it."

"I understand," he said, and gave her a good-night kiss so devoid of feeling that she wanted to thrust herself against him once more, just to see if she could recharge his manhood. But she had a feeling he had it under control. The moment he drove away she started walking, trying to get out from under the nameless dread. She went into a bar and had

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three double Scotches, sitting beside a whiskered drunk whose foul breath and grimy clothing bespoke a total bender of at least a week. She looked into his red-rimmed eyes, marinated in bitterness, and slid off her stool.

"I'm going home now," she said.

And of course he followed her out, walking straight and careful beside her until they reached her apartment building. As she fitted her key in the lock, she felt his hand dart up under the back of her dress and jerk down her underwear without the least sign of tenderness. His broken-nailed, dirty fingers groped, twisted and finally probed her innermost secret as she turned the key, opened the door, and entered. A bright worm of saliva trailed down the corner of his mouth as he stepped inside. She closed the door and turned, holding out her arms to him, smiling as he lurched within their circle. Then she drove her knee up into his groin with the tight-coiled strength of a panther. He staggered back, his face pasty. He opened his mouth as if to speak, and a fountain of yellow, foamy liquid gushed out. He gasped, choked, and doubled over, more liquid spewing as he fell and rolled against the wall, his arms crossed over his stomach. Anne took a pack of cigarettes from her handbag, shook one out, and lit it. She smoked quietly until the man stopped vomiting and looked up at her. Desire was gone from his eyes; the bitterness remained, overlaid with a shadow of fear.

"Clean the puke up, then leave," she said.

"You bitch!"

A thrill of pleasure shot through her. She got a kitchen towel and threw it on the floor beside him. "You've got five minutes. Then I'll call the police and tell them you forced your way in."

Watching him clean up the mess, she felt an urge to take the butcher knife and drive it into his neck. *No, that's silly.* She walked into the bathroom, took a Seconal tablet, and bathed her face in cold water. When she came out the man had gone. Anne went to bed and slept.

Strange to think that had happened only a week ago. Now she was Mrs. Van Dieman, and for the past three hours they'd been jolting through a wasteland of slate-colored ridges and canyons and senseless heaps of beige rock. It was like a vast mine tailing overlaid by thornbrush and cactus. Every plant bristled with needles pointing directly at her. She counted eight lizards, four jack rabbits, two cottontails, two rattlesnakes and one horned toad before she tired of the game.

"Do you leave the estate unguarded?" she asked.

"There are servants," he said, catapulting her mind into visions

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of a white-coated Filipino serving frosted drinks, a Mexican gardener touching his sombrero respectfully, a slim mulatto girl holding a towel as Anne stepped out of a sunken onyx tub. Ah, the bath. She would soak for an hour, drop a couple of pills (amphetamines made her passionate), and then go into the bedroom and consummate this damned farce.

I mustn't assume it's going to be bad. It's going to be wonderful, because he's a handsome young man. And I like handsome young men. Wouldn't any woman?

You're not any woman. You're Anne Pirtle, and you've murdered one husband already. And you're going to kill this one.

The thought was a cold sword slicing into her guts. Her fingers clutched suddenly at her purse. Cold sweat condensed in her armpits, on the inside of her thighs. She thought of Verne. Oh, Verne. He merged into a tenderness now . . . but during those early years when passion burned her like incense, only a man could assuage the sweet agony for even a moment, and Verne was not the man. So . . . failing to dominate her physically, he tried other means, doling out household expenses, canceling her credit cards, making her ask for an allowance . . . until one day he allowed her to shampoo his hair while he sat in the bathtub, eyes closed tightly to keep out the lather, and in one quick, programmed motion, she gripped his cheeks and forced his mouth open, shoved the gun inside against his strangled gasp, and pulled the trigger. Then she stepped back and turned on the shower, making sure that none of the blood and gray stuff had gotten on her, and started screaming. By the time the first neighbors arrived she had managed to work herself into an authentic faint.

Only to discover that Verne's trust fund reverted to his half-sister, and she was left without even the insurance because the policy was null and void in the event of suicide . . .

This time it won't go wrong, she decided. There's no other heir, and it all comes to me, me me me . . . She didn't know how she'd do it. There were so many ways. She'd heard that desert scorpions were deadly; catch one and put it in his bed, something like that. Of course those servants would have to be taken into account, dismissed or given a day off . . . after . . .

Well, after the wedding night.

She glanced at his tanned hands resting lightly on the wheel, golden hairs sprouting in precise squares behind each knuckle. He always turned the wheel exactly the amount needed to follow the tortuous road; there was never the faintest whisper of gears as he shifted up and down the ridges. She reminded herself that he'd

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raced cars in the mountains of Italy. He'd been a skydiver too, a polo star, tennis champion . . . In the scrapbook she'd seen in his apartment while waiting for him to pack, the clippings had shown him wearing flowers, holding loving cups, receiving kisses from movie stars, shaking hands, and in each photo his face wore exactly the same smile, showed exactly the same number of shining white teeth. She also recalled him in the baggy white trousers and black belt of a karate expert, and wondered with a sudden chill if she could do it . . .

She put the thought from her mind. She had no intention of challenging him to open combat. Perhaps in the very heat of love . . . But not the first time, no. She wanted to learn if he was perfect in his love-making, as he was in everything else. *There is no reason to be otherwise,* he would say. She felt her legs go tingly—

Then the car topped a ridge, and despite herself she felt joy rise insider her breast. "Oh! Stop!"

She was so entranced by the great sprawl of masonry that she didn't feel the car halt. The house . . . it could have been called a castle, if its style had not been so anomalous, fitting no time and no place, but creating its own atmosphere. The tile roofs caught the reddening rays of the sun and in some areas glowed like hot coals, and in others turned a sullen black-red. Below them the walls, once whitewashed, were streaked with gray where the plaster had peeled away from the abode. Vines rose from the ground like green surf, and the bougainvillea was a red flame crawling along the gallery. Pointed arches made her think of Arabian nights, but the front of the house was Grecian, with pillars and stone steps and a mosaic walkway leading down to a stone arch with a wrought-iron gate. The lawn was a sparkling emerald set in the slaty stone of the desert . . .

"Lovely," she said, looking over at him. Without expression he put the car in gear and started down the slope. She had a feeling that he never actually thought about anything, but merely waited until the time for action and then took the appropriate step. As he crossed a clear stream, she felt the coolness rise to her face. She wanted to wade among the rocks and pick the watercress which matted the surface—but that would be overplaying it. For a moment she hated herself, hated the need to play a part, and wished she could retain her feeling of girlish surprise for a while longer. But it was too late; she had played too many parts, there were too many masks within easy reach. She felt her throat assume the shape which would give her words the right tone of respectful indulgence, and said:

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"Your mother loved it here, I imagine."

"Yes."

His tone was flat, which made her think he didn't want to talk about his mother. He'd never mentioned her, not even when he talked about his youth, and the album had contained no pictures of her—nor of his father either, for that matter.

The road surface changed from gravel to paving blocks, skirting the eight-foot stone wall as it climbed the ridge and came down behind the house. A studded wooden gate swung open an instant before the car's bumper touched it; the car rolled into a cobbled courtyard, shaded by pepper trees, and stopped. Turning, Anne saw a man bar the gates and walk toward her. She felt a tremor of uneasiness in her breast. His eyes, like black cherries, were fixed on *her*. He wore baggy linen pants and a leather jacket, unbuttoned, which hung to his waist. He set each sandaled foot directly before the other in the manner of an Indian; his face was mahogany, with a hatchet chin triangulating up to a broad Mayan forehead. She thought he was going to approach her, but at the last minute he turned and opened the car trunk.

"Go with him," said Dirk. "He'll take you to your room."

She climbed out of the car and walked to the rear. "Buenas tardes," she said, but the man only lifted out her bags and walked toward the house. She followed him, recalling that Dirk had not spoken to him, nor had he spoken to Dirk. What about those stories of happy servants greeting the master? Rejoicing over the arrival of his bride? Hollywood hogwash. This is the way it *is*. Servants are animated furniture; you treat them as such when you've been wealthy for centuries. I will have to learn . . .

When she saw her room, her breath left her again. Paneled walls of white, inlaid with golden scrolls. A tapestry on the wall, definitely a Fragonard, with an impossibly sweet nude girl sitting with a fully clothed man in a jewel-like garden. The fireplace was fronted by blue porcelain, garnished in delicate nymphs and shepherds.

Hearing a sound from the bathroom, she went in and saw a dark woman in a brown, sack-like dress bending over a long black tub fitted with gold faucets. The vanity alcove and long douching stool revealed that it had been designed for a woman.

The woman straightened, wiping her hands on her dress and regarding Anne with a complete absence of expression. Anne smiled and tried her Spanish. "Me llamo Ana. Y usted?"

The woman did nothing; her eyes gave no evidence that she

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was even trying to understand.

"No habla espanol?" asked Anne. "You speak English? Parlez vous francais? Sprechen sie Deutsch? Govoreetye Porusski?"

Each question was followed by that buzzing silence during which two people look at each other and realize they cannot speak. Anne felt a sudden, naked fear.

"Is there a telephone?"

The woman stood like a wall. Anne made the motion of dialing, raising a receiver to her ear. The woman said:

"No." It was a vibrant sound coming from deep in her chest, reminding Anne of those voice-boxes they put in people whose throats have been eaten out by cancer. Then the woman walked past her and left the room.

Oh well . . . Anne's fear faded as she undressed and stepped into the tub. The water was exactly the right warmth, imbued with a minty fragrance. The mirrors were placed so that she could watch herself in the bath. Her ivory shoulders gleamed, her breasts were buoyed up into a fertile fullness. Just as good as they were twenty years ago. Forget the surgery, the hormone treatments. No babies had gnawed at those succulent pink tips, that was the reason. *Would Dirk expect children?* Sudden fear of pain, dread of entering the black knot of nothingness. Doctors, drugs, uncontrollable babble. *What would she tell?* All those old families had that yearning for a male heir to carry on the line. Probably the only reason they ever married. A woman was a brood-mare, a garden of flesh in which to plant their seeds.

She shivered. The water had cooled. She twisted the hot water tap and listened to the trickle from distant pipes draw nearer until it coughed and gurgled into the tub. She let the spreading warmth soothe her body and rested the back of her neck on the cool tiles. She looked up at the light and yawned.

There will be no children, she thought.

A starter whirred, an engine coughed. She jumped out of the tub, seized a large mauve bath-towel and ran barefoot onto the lawn. A dusty blue pickup was disappearing over the far ridge, trailing a Spencerian scroll of gray dust. The sun blazed red on a distant mesa; the desert lay shadowless in the growing dusk. It was like a moon landscape, lonely and frightening.

She saw Dirk standing motionless near the front gate. Loneliness drew her to him; she felt grateful to him simply for being human, and being there. The cropped grass tickled the soles of her feet as she approached him. When she was six feet away, he turned, and she knew he'd been aware of her presence all the time.

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"I sent them away for the night," he said. "I thought it would be nice to be alone."

She said nothing. Why should she be afraid?

"Why indeed?" he said, with a half smile. She realized he'd read her mind, but there was no time to consider it, for his hand came out like a striking cobra and jerked the towel from her body. She stood naked, forgetting even to hold her breasts erect. She became aware that her body, half bent in concealment, had gradually evolved into an attitude of feminine submission. She found the pose restful, and hated herself for enjoying it. A thought came into her mind like a shadow from antiquity: *I am yours, my Lord. Do what you will.*

And he did, seizing her in his arms and drawing her to him in a kiss which reduced her muscles to water. His mouth drew the strength from her body; she drooped to the ground and lay on the grass with the blades prickling her back. She saw no emotion in his face as he looked down at her; he seemed to be measuring the precise distance between her breasts, the exact depth of her navel, the circumference of her thighs. It was a calculating look which left out any recognition of her as a woman.

"Dinner is ready, Anne. We'll eat first."

As he walked away in steady, even paces, she knew she would enjoy killing him.

The dining room occupied the long nave of the house. A stone fireplace rose at one end. Dim lights glowed from niches along the walls. Sometimes the lights went dim, and she could hear the distant hum of a generator. In a way the sound reassured her; in another way, it reminded her of the darkness which billowed and swirled behind the light. But the food was hot, and delicious, all of it prepared and waiting on an electric hot plate set in the center of the long oak table. Mock turtle soup; a salad of cucumbers, lettuce, green peppers; fresh-water trout, golden-browned; and a thick filet which divided itself into pungent pink squares the moment her knife touched it. She ate with silver so heavy that her wrist ached by the time she had finished. Dirk took the wine from the silver bucket beside him and came around the table to fill her goblet. She drank and wondered what she could say to him. For God's sake, three hours and I'm bored. The silver, the deep-piled carpets, the portraits which lined the wall, the crystal chandelier, these were things she had always wanted. Now she felt a frightening emptiness. *Of course,* she thought, *I no longer want them —because I have them. I must learn to enjoy what I have.*

She allowed the wine to flow

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into her mouth, trying to savor the taste with her tongue and throat. Do I really like wine? she wondered. She stroked the jeweled crest of the goblet with her thumb and wondered: Do I really like jewels? Who am I?

"Dirk—?"

"Yes, Anne."

I would dearly love to climb this lovely table and stride down its length, kicking all this precious trash to the floor and smashing all this lovely glass; and at the end of the walk I would smash my foot into your too-perfect, too-handsome, too-confident face; and then maybe you would realize that I am what men have made me, an unclean vessel, a filthy, selfish, whoring bitch whose only genuine feeling in life has been hatred.

"I think I'll go to bed, Dirk."

He rose and dabbed his lips, nodding. "My room is next to yours, when you're ready."

As she undressed and perfumed her body, she felt a snarling bitterness which warred with the tingling anticipation in her loins. Summon her, like a . . . hell, she didn't know what. So brusque and offhand. That's the way they were, these aristocrats. Her day would come. Meanwhile, play it cool. Put on the sheer black, enter smiling, shy and demure as a lamb to slaughter . . .

Everything changed when she entered his room. He stood nude, his body highlighted by the glow from her room. She loved the flat double planes of his upper chest, the ridged perfection of his stomach, the long clean golden triangle of his torso. He took her hand and said:

"Anne, you're lovely."

He disrobed her with a tenderness that made her feel pure and virginal, then lay her down on the silken sheet—golden man, symbol of purity and light, love and goodness, so holy that her heart ached to receive him. He made love to her with such subtle sweetness that each movement was a sigh of perfumed air in a sultan's garden, each touch a note of music pulsing along her nerves. She seemed to be climbing a mountain, out of a valley of slime. Soon she would reach the top, Nirvana, Heaven, whatever . . .

Suddenly Dirk stopped moving. For a moment her actions continued, like an engine that turns over after the switch is off. Then she became aware that his weight had gone inert, like cold mutton. The temperature of his skin, a moment ago like sun-warmed stone, had become neutral. His eyes—she twisted her neck to look, and her jaws gaped open, locked in a soundless scream.

His eyes were not eyes but painted glass. Not that they had

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ceased to see, but that they had never seen. The lovely body was not dead, it had never lived.

In a frenzy she pushed herself from beneath him and leaped out of bed. Her skin tried to crawl off her body. She sensed a presence behind her which raised each single hair on her head, drew each cell of her flesh into a knot of cold fear.

She turned.

It lay in the fireplace, a mass of gray writhings. It made a dry whispering sound as its gray thousand-tentacled shape spread out across the hearth. It came nearer, not exactly moving, but rather as though its mass had filled the cavity of the fireplace and was spreading into the room.

Ageless, eternal, utterly loathsome. She screamed, and the sound ripped apart the veils of deceit she had so carefully wrapped around herself. She knew what she had become, why she had found no peace and joy in men.

Hate exploded inside her brain, burning away all fear. The thing was Evil. It had planted its seed in her . . . Ah, when? So many years ago, when she had walked in the park that strange cricket-chirruping afternoon, and the man had paid her a quarter to sit on his lap. The thing had been so tiny at first, like a spider inside her brain, growing as it fed on small tidbits: a peek at a classmate's test paper, a lie which divided a yellow-haired girl from the boy Anne wanted, a few coins taken from her mother's purse . . .

She shrieked with rage and lunged at the shape which now covered most of the floor. She stamped it with her bare feet, her mouth spraying spittle as she uttered the foulest obscenities she could think of. A tendril slid around her ankle and climbed her leg, entering . . . Oh, God, no! Another encircled her waist, hot, dry, slick like the surface of moth wings. She clawed it with her fingernails, but it seemed only to swell and grow, pulsating with pleasure. She screamed as it enwrapped her neck and forced its way between her jaws. Even then she did not surrender, but clamped her teeth on the rubbery substance and ground them from side to side.

Swelling with contentment, the creature fed silently on the ripened fruit. The white body of Anne was visible here and there, still struggling in the coils. After a time her head appeared, its blue eyes shining, its perfect white teeth exposed in a rictus of death.

The creature began to divide itself, and then there were two.

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Neil Shapiro made his first appearance here with FROM THE MOON, WITH LOVE *(February 1970), an inventive and offbeat post-holocaust story. His second story is about a telepath—a beautiful girl who is stored like an expensive tool, to be used only in contacting alien civilizations—and it is equally impressive in its ability to both move and amuse the reader.*

IN BLACK OF MANY COLORS

by Neil Shapiro

HER NAME WAS CINNABAR AND she spun in a stationary orbit three hundred miles above the deepest part of the deepest ocean. She slept as she had been sleeping for a hundred years. But she awaited no kiss, no prince, and she did not expect to live happily ever after. For her, it was enough to know that she need only live when she was needed. Even that did not make her happy—at the time, nothing could have achieved that—but it did make her waking hours more bearable to know that sleep, short bursts of death, waited for her like a healing, comforting balm.

She was very beautiful in her sleep. Her long, auburn tresses were artistically arranged so that they always looked wind-tossed and alive. Her legs were daintily, prettily crossed, and ever so carefully uncovered. Her cheeks were flushed, and her hands were folded over her breast. She floated, sleeping, in a transparent crypt; it seemed as if her beauty had burned its way out. At first, the Institute had wanted to encase her in a thick, opaque coffin behind three locked hatches to which only they would have the combination. But, instead, they had settled on this revolving, rotating display. It might have proved different had she been ugly. But if she had been ugly, or even plain, there might now be no stories to tell of her.

She was condemned to be displayed, to be used; to be simply Cinnabar.

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Condemned? Yes, condemned is certainly the word.

The people who knew of her, who planned around her, had a legend about her. Or perhaps, just a dirty joke. They said that someday the stars would fly to her coffin to wake her, and that she would be raped by the sun. But that was just a joke; people like to hear themselves talk poetically even if it's about something which shouldn't be mentioned.

At the time Star-Captain Lync Harley awakened her, she had been sleeping for at least one hundred years. It is possible that had she known they would need her again, she would have chosen, or stolen, a permanent death. One of the few things which kept her sane was her belief that one time she would go to sleep and they would not need her, and she would never awaken. Perhaps that is a measure of her, that she would delude herself for another's benefit. But, it could be, that she wasn't really all that sane.

Lync Harley, though, was known to be a sane man. He had to be, it was the prime qualification for his work. You just can't have insane space-captains, not if you ever want to see them again after their first launching.

His robot servants, his crew, awoke Cinnabar with the application of the sixty drugs and the twenty devices, and then they brought her along to the captain's cabin. It is told that Cinnabar cried four tears when she realized she was awake, and did not say one word for many hours. But this is usually discounted, as the report came from a peculiarly unreliable robot. Even so, there are still arguments at the Institute about causes and effects and Cinnabar. But even arguments do not portend agreement or belief, one way or the other.

Cinnabar delicately seated herself in the deep-cushioned chair across the desk from Star-Captain Harley. She did not speak, and she did not smile. But she was not snubbing him; she very rarely smiled. Put yourself in her position; if you knew you were going to be used again, how much would you smile?

Lync saw she was beautiful. But that did not influence him; he had seen more beautiful girls than he could remember. He had made love with more beautiful girls than he could remember. To him, at that time, Cinnabar was something more or perhaps less than that. She was a tool.

"You know, you're a bit of a legend," he said, rather noncommittally.

Cinnabar glanced up at him from where she had been staring at her hands folded in her lap.

"I know," she said. "Which version do you prefer? The one which says I'm insane or the one that goes that I'm only sick, or do

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you like the one that says I am the reincarnation of the Madonna, but childless?"

Harley was flustered, he wasn't used to sarcasm. "I never thought much about it," he said. "But then, I don't know enough about you, even though I've read the scientific explanations."

"Scientific?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "of course. Your genes." He wondered vaguely if he was blushing.

"Genes," she repeated, "of course. Genes." She laughed, and her laughter sounded piercing, yet melodious. "Genes." More to herself than to Harley she whispered, "Double, double, toil and trouble: Fire burn and cauldron bubble." There was a smile on her face now.

Lync didn't know what to make of that, and so he ignored it. "You," he said, "are a telepath. The only one, the first one, and perhaps the last one."

She interrupted him again.

"Telepath," she said, and the laughter was back in her voice. But whether it was laughter at Harley or herself could not be known. "Telepath, eye of newt and toe of frog: Wool of bat and tongue of dog."

Harley was confused and it showed. What was worse, he knew it did. This further unnerved him. The girl was talking nonsense to him. He did not believe in nonsense.

"Shakespeare," she said. "*Macbeth*. How are your hands, Captain?"

"Are you all right?" he asked. "The ship's medical dispensary can be put at your service. I was told that you'd be . . ." He stopped suddenly and his eyelid twitched.

"I'd be what?" she asked sweetly.

Lync controlled himself. "A little uneasy," he said smoothly, "unnerved perhaps."

"Nothing can unnerve me," she said. The laughter was gone now; it might never have been there. "Because everything can hurt me. If your life is fire, flames can no longer burn you and cauldrons no longer scald you."

She was silent; he found he didn't like that.

"Tell me," he said, "how is it to be like you are?"

Cinnabar looked surprised and, like all emotions, she wore the expression well. "You are the first to ask me that, so I'll tell you. It is bad, very bad. I have read the ancient books, and I would prefer Hell to my present life. I can feel minds and all of them are the same."

Her eyes were turned away from Lync, and they were like blue lights.

"It's like living with a million songbirds. Each individual song is beautiful at times, low pitched or high. But taken together, all of

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them at once, it can be quite painful."

"And my mind?" Lync was surprised to hear himself ask. But, somehow, it seemed important to him that he know what type of song he was singing.

"You have a flavor of death and fear. Your mind is like a brand. But I can stay with you for a short period without going more insane than I have to. Only when there are many people do I feel myself dying. Please," her voice was now nearly inaudible, "may we talk of something else?"

He groped for the words. "I'm supposed to brief you," he offered.

"Then brief me, Captain. We all have to follow our orders. Sometimes, though, I wish I could convince myself that I was more important than a set of orders. Even highest orders."

Captain Harley could see the girl was terribly discomforted and that she would prefer to be left alone. But, he thought, once he got the briefing over with, she could disappear for the rest of the voyage. At least, until she was needed.

"We have been assigned to contact a quasi-humanoid race on Beta Lyrae Three. Rather, you have been assigned. I am ordered to assist you."

"What are they like?" she asked.

"They are rather tall and thin. Their facial features are not as prominent as in humans, and they wear no clothing."

"But what are they *like?*" she repeated, accenting the last word. She seemed more animate now, interested, as a chisel would be in a block of marble. Marble it would carve or be shattered upon.

"Well, from what the scouts report, they have two viable civilizations existing side by side. One is highly mechanized with all the trappings that implies. But the other is arboreal. Each city is built near a forest. It appears that the beings spend the first half of their lives in the cities and the other in the forest. It is rather an idyllic idea, I suppose."

"Why am I needed, Captain?" It was perhaps a question, but she phrased it like an accusation. It was as if, Harley thought, she thinks I picked her up on my own initiative.

"They refuse contact. They have murdered all of the regular contact teams assigned to them. They are the most wildly exophobic race we have yet met. But, part of their race is very close to discovering a star-drive of their own. They must be contacted and brought into the Institute of Worlds." His last words were delivered in a singsong voice as he parroted the official report.

She replied to an earlier part of his speech. "Not murdered, Captain, only killed. Humanoids of different species cannot murder

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one another." Her voice became harsh suddenly, "I will leave now. We will talk later." As she spoke she was walking to the door, and on her last words, it closed behind her.

As was her practice, Cinnabar began to strike up conversation with a few of the star-ship's complement of robots. As she did not expect the robots to be cold, logical, aloof and forbidding; to her they were warm and emotional, and they talked to her and comforted her. This would have surprised their builders, but Cinnabar took it as a matter of course.

She talked with one older robot whose hull was pitted and dull. His name was Four, a low and distinguished number.

Cinnabar enjoyed being around robots and around ones like Four in particular. His thoughts were like tiny, cold ice-cubes that would slither up and down her body, cooling her from the fires.

"It beats me," Four said, "why you don't go up three decks, over two halls, into the main lavatory and slit your wrists."

"You wouldn't understand," Cinnabar gently told him. "I am able to delude myself that life has meaning."

"Still," Four said, "you can't live among your own kind, so why live at all?"

Cinnabar reached down to the floor and lifted up a small cleaning robot. It whirred and curled its long, whisker-like sensors around her wrist. It attempted to polish her arm, like a kitten licking a face.

"There are reasons," Cinnabar said, and lowered her light burden back to the deck, "besides, I *can* live, I've proved it. I am over a hundred years old, and that may be a record."

Four reverted to his primal heritage of logic. "That doesn't count; you haven't been awake for a hundred years."

"If you were a telepath like myself, you might know what you are talking about. If out of a hundred-plus years I've been awake for twenty, what difference does that make? For a telepath, twenty years is more than a hundred. I'm old, I know that. Old people begin to fear true death. The idea clutches at me, and sometimes I feel certain I prefer fire and death to nothingness. But never during the times I feel myself burning."

For a moment, Four was silent. It was obvious he was trying to think deep, unrobotic thoughts.

He asked with metallic pleading, "Can you read my mind, Cinnabar?"

"Yes."

"Is it as bad for you as your own kinds'?"

"Only at times like this when you try to think like a man. At other times your thoughts are clean, like polished cogs and shining gears."

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"I'm sorry," Four said, "it won't happen again. Occasionally I worry whether I have a mind."

"What kind of man is the captain?" Cinnabar asked.

"As captains go he is more meticulous than some and less so than others. Why do you ask?"

She brushed the tiny skittering ones away from her legs and answered him.

"Because, in all my hundred years he is unlike others I have met. His thoughts, while painful and flaming, have an added dimension or perhaps a subtracted one."

"While you sleep, do you ever feel lonely dreams?" Four asked.

"No, I don't know. Why would it matter?"

"I'd rather not say. I may have computed everything wrong. But I, myself, have never noticed anything unusual about our captain."

"I suppose I don't either, not really. But after all this time, I can hope. He may be different, I may be able to live with him. His thoughts may not burn quite as deeply or as harshly as others." Her voice changed from tones of wistfulness to those of macabre humor. "He may even give me cause to be grateful. He may kill me."

"At times," Four said, "your emotional illogic verges on being calculable."

Captain Harley, at his court-martial, never seemed to be so much a man obsessed with guilt, as one obsessed with his own innocence. This defense, or lack of one, was not the most fruitful of courses he could have pursued, and there were varying reactions to it. As Vanessa Insoul, a Commander of the Institute of Worlds put it, "The man was an animal. He didn't need orders; he needed personal ethics. It would be ludicrous to even hint that the fault did not lie with the man. It could not lie elsewhere."

There were conflicting opinions on that however, as expressed to this very day by such as Madame Jousey, also a Commander of the Institute, who has never backslid in her belief that, "Harley acted under drives and desires that may be found in any man, and understood by few. That we even brought him to trial was worse than injustice. It was a travesty. But, then, so is the Universe."

Whichever of the two major opinions is correct, the story remains the same, only the moral changes. It is not entirely impossible for one story to have two conflicting morals; at times it is even quite interesting.

But all that only concerns peripherally what was happening somewhere out in the Cygnus regions of space, out where the stars do not all bear known names, and where all maps are not even yet

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drawn. It was a fitting place for the first move, not quite out in the wilderness but neither in the midst of civilization.

Harley invited Cinnabar to share dinner with him in his cabin. There is no logical explanation for this. One thing he knew, must have known, were the dangers of fraternization. He had no way of knowing what it would lead to, but that is small excuse. For accepting, the blame must be placed with Cinnabar, who knew herself as no one else was equipped to. But recriminations are useless now.

Lync was seated at one end of the long table and Cinnabar at the other. Like a medieval King and Queen, neither of them trusting the other not to poison the food, but not wanting to eat alone.

"What do you do all day?" Lync asked.

"I talk with the robots," Cinnabar answered. "I find them to be companionable on trips such as this. On this ship there is one in particular who strikes me as being a fine example of his species. He is cold at first, but one can get to know him from cog to wheel, if one is willing to spend the time."

Harley smiled. "I would," he said, "hardly think that the effort would be worth the rewards."

Cinnabar reached to the plate of apples before her and slowly bit into one. She felt the captain's mind around hers like a warm presence. It was a new feeling for her, but she knew it all too soon could change, and she would again be seared.

"I find them relaxing," she explained. "They do not have actual thoughts, but something different. They are, well, different."

The captain refilled his wine glass. He appeared to study his reflection on the surface of the liquid.

"I suppose that robots would be easier on you than humans."

She took that as a question. "Yes, they are. There are twenty-two robots in the between-walls of this ship. Being around an equal number of people would drive me close to insanity."

"You can, I assume, put up with one person at a time? His thoughts?"

In a way his question caught her off guard. She had known the general direction of his thoughts, but she had hoped he wouldn't vocalize them, as she didn't know how she would—or should—reply. Reading minds, or rather knowing them, did not always provide her with the right, the soft answer. And as she had spent the majority of her life asleep, she had never developed the art of guile to the magnificent heights that most people achieve.

"Yes, I can put up with one at a time. Please, don't take that personally. I have found, in the past,

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that you of space have the freshest, cleanest minds. But, you are still human."

Harley rose from his place at the table and walked to where she was sitting. He placed his hands lightly on her shoulders and stood behind her.

"Human?" he asked.

"If you could see your own mind now," she said, "you would know what I mean."

"Why?"

"Please. Leave me alone now. I must withdraw again. It's been too long. Too long. It always has been, always will be. Excuse me."

She rose and Lync's hands fell from her shoulders. He looked chagrined.

"Will you dine with me tomorrow night?" he asked.

"I don't know. I may, I may not. We may both be dead by tomorrow. We may hit a star."

"We'll have no such luck," Lync said. "We'll be alive tomorrow and one day closer to our goal. But perhaps the food will be better."

"Perhaps," she said, and left.

The following afternoon she still had not decided whether she would see him at dinner. Understand that she was not debating whether or not to be polite. She was deciding whether to place herself within a radius of pain. If it had been a question of politeness only, she would not have gone. The opposite of politeness is an instinct. The former is learned and Cinnabar, of course, had never learned it.

She sought out Four for his advice.

"I don't know," she said to that robot, "whether I should accept his invitation or decline it. It could cause me pain if I do and may cause him pain if I don't."

Four thought it over, a process which took him nearly a millisecond. "It depends on which instinct you wish to place first," he said, "self-preservation or gregariousness."

"That's just it. I don't know which is the more important. I don't care all that much for self-preservation. But I don't know if I like people enough to decide for gregariousness."

"How much do you like people?" Four asked. As a machine it was important to him to qualify and quantify data, and to keep his own memory banks stocked. It wasn't, therefore, truly a question on his part.

"Well," Cinnabar said slowly and deliberately, "I like them in theory, but the practice takes a lot out of me."

"It will have to be your own decision. I have not enough relevant data to compute it for you. The captain may wish your presence at his table for any number of reasons. He may want to talk to you, to hear you, to watch you, to

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molest you, or any combination of approximately three hundred and forty-one actions."

"Oh, damn," Cinnabar said (but with class), "I just don't know what to do." Again she mumbled in half whisper, "how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seems to me all the uses of this world. Shakespeare. *Hamlet.*"

"Tell me," Four seemed as interested as he could appear, "who is this Shakespeare you're continually quoting? At first, I thought he was an old Commander of the Institute, but the central indexes contain no references."

"No references?" There was amazement in her voice.

"To his works, but not to the man."

"Oh. He was an old author and was popular in the ancient times."

"I didn't realize you were a student of History."

"I'm not."

"Then," Four said, his voice modulated to carry reasonable levels of curiosity, "why do you read him?"

She paused and said something else from what she first looked as if she was getting ready to say. "We're alike," she said. "We both are trapped by other peoples' minds, by their emotions. We both walk the same maze."

"I see," Four said. "Sometimes I feel sorry for you. Or if not sorry, my circuitry is disturbed."

Cinnabar reached up and placed her slim arms on his shelf-like shoulders.

"Four, I don't know what I would do without you and your kind. Whom else could I talk to? I must be very tiring for you."

"Tiring?" Four imitated a human laugh. It was a fair try. "Hardly. On the contrary. Being your slave, what should I do but tend upon the hours and times of your desire? Shakespeare, my dear Cinnabar. Sonnet Fifty-Seven."

She finally decided to dine with the captain. At that point it might have been best for her, and the captain, if their ship had plunged into the black heart of a neutron star. But that's only one opinion; you may disagree.

"Come in," Lync said, and she seated herself at her end of the table. Demurely, shyly.

"Why not move down here?" He frowned. "Being that close to me wouldn't affect your condition adversely, would it?"

"No." She reseated herself at that place. "I don't suppose it will. As I said, I can stand one person's thoughts."

"Tell me," Lync said, "what do you think of the stars?"

"They're quiet from far away," she said. "Sometimes I have short small dreams while I sleep. I dream that I'm awake but still floating among them. Then they

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change to cold, bright diamonds scattered around me like sand, precious sand. I can see them spinning in my dream, around and around me, throwing sparkles of color against the walls of my crystal cocoon. But the dream never ends happily. They spin too fast, too long, and the colors change to liquid fire which eats its way into me and bathes me in its heat. I . . ." She stared at the food before her. "I'm sorry, Captain. I did not mean to rant so. I will control myself."

"No, it's all right. No one should have to control himself while talking about the stars, leastwise not while traveling by them. The stars affect me also, though I have known them long. They are silent and mysterious; I see no fire in them. They are keeping me from finding something. At times," his voice became forced and his eyes dropped from hers, "at times I think I may be a lonely man."

"Lonely?"

"Yes, in a way. You and I are opposites. In a crowd you are uncomfortable as you are pressed in on from all sides. But in a crowd I feel no one. No matter how many are around me."

"I would guess," she said, "that the results are the same for both of us. You must be a very strong man," she paused, "at least you remain alive. You never sleep, not really, not for years and years at a time. It must be horrifying. I can't imagine never having an escape."

"I'm not strong," Harley said. "Of the two of us, you probably have the most in your favor. I only go on and on never doing anything but what I've done before."

"Strange," she said, "when you talk like that your mind seems nearly musical and blends with my own. I have never had that happen before. I don't know what to make of it."

Their eyes met for a brief instant, and then they each glanced away.

"I think we should eat. It will get cold."

"Yes," Cinnabar said, "it will get cold."

Their ship was of the newest type. Spiritually it had its beauty, but esthetically it had the shape of a blind worm. Sinuously long, having no front, no back, it inched its way to the stars at relatively slow and worm-like speeds.

Like a worm disturbing, ingesting, excreting the earth around it, the ship moved its way through the Universe, bending and shaping its medium around it. Changing it, enriching it, living from its energies, sucking more of it in from ahead, leaving what it had used behind.

There was an eye in the worm, a blind eye.

Up in the nose of the ship was

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the lounge, the blind eye of the ship. Up where the hull was like glass, in the beginning of the area where the Universe was always changing, always being molded, where light-speed was translated from a dream to a crawl. Where the stars appeared to dance.

Soft chairs and couches lined the interior of the eye, three or four along each wall of the lounge. Lync and Cinnabar sat together on one divan where all the walls shimmered. The ship cleaved its way through the stars and distorted them, seemingly changed them by its passage. The multicolored lights of the changed stars reflected from their eyes.

"Thoughts," Cinnabar whispered, "the colors are the way thoughts should be, but never are."

"Sometimes," Lync said, "I think this is the way the stars are in reality but that normally man changes them in his mind so that he can understand the image."

Cinnabar glanced at his hand where it rested lightly on her arm and then looked back out on the spectacle of the warped stars.

"Your thoughts," she said, "are close to this." She pointed to the pinwheels, the spirals, the stars. "That, or I have become attuned to you."

Lync turned to her and smiled. His own face cast a shadow across hers so that the colors did not fall on her.

"I think that I may have talents of my own." His voice was low but vibrant. "I cannot read thoughts, but I can see your mind. It puts this," his gesture encompassed the Universe, "to shame."

When she spoke, her voice was harsh and she moved her face so that it was no longer under his. "Don't even joke about that. You can't know what it is like."

He rose from the couch and pressed his hands flat against a section of the glass. It was as if he was attempting to hold back all the colors that flickered outside.

"Your thoughts," she said, unsteady, her hands moving to different rhythms, "don't voice it. It won't make any difference if you say it or not. The answer is no, there is no way I can do that."

"I have to ask." He turned from the window so that he faced her silhouetted against the colors. "I have to at least try."

She turned from him, from the stars, and brought her hands up to her eyes. "I don't want to hear it, please."

"You and I have the whole Universe to run to. We don't have to go to Beta Lyrae Three, or anywhere they can use you. I know how painful this is for you. You can't refuse me, it'd be insane."

"Then, we have insanity. I can't run, Lync; I never learned. Now, it's too late." She looked back up at him, her expression was tortured, pleading.

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He ran his hand along the window; it left streaks of wet behind it. "I can force you, you know. The ship is still my command. I can turn it to any direction I choose."

Tears ran down her cheeks. In the light from the stars they glittered like multifaceted diamonds, all colors, all light. "Don't Lync. Don't go on. It wouldn't be that way, it couldn't. I know."

Lync leaned back against the glass wall. The light reflected off the gold bars on his uniform's shoulders and trickled its way up his face like reaching, macabre, ghostly hands.

"I won't force you," he said, "even if I could. Listen to me, there is only one way for us, my way. If we wait much longer, we'll never have the chance. They'll take you to use you again. While you sleep I'll grow older and die."

She sat up straight, pressed against the soft couch. Her eyes were closed. The multicolored, spinning lights met only the flesh over her eyes.

"I'm blind," she said, and more tears squeezed out from under her lids. "They've made me that way. I have to do what I've always done. I've never done anything else. Your thoughts are like silk against skin, but there is a rougher fate waiting for me. One I can't avoid. I don't expect you to understand, but you have to respect this. But don't ever forget I wanted to go with you. I do, now. I want to, but I can't."

Now, when Lync spoke, it was as if he disbelieved everything, what he had heard, what he had seen, the entire Universe of light.

"No," he said. "I will force you, then. I will lock you into the between-walls of this ship and take you to a place of life, our life."

"You won't do that," Cinnabar said. Her eyes were open now and dry. "You can't."

Outside, on either side of their worm, the lights whirled and coalesced. The stars ran one over the other like liquid flames, like liquid ice, like flowing earth.

He cradled her head on his arm, and bent to her. Their eyes met, their lips, their bodies.

"You can't," she said softly now. "I know your mind too well. Your thoughts are too crystalline, too soft, too blue, too human. You will do what we have to."

He felt as if he was a puppet on strings. He felt, he felt, he didn't know.

"I will, then," he said. "You're probably right. We can never run, even together. If we did, it would be too far, too fast, too long. We would lose each other when one of us fell."

He kissed her again. She felt his mind all around her.

"Soon, it will all be over," she whispered, "too soon. I know, I can tell."

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"No," he said, "we will have as long as we need, as long as we need."

"We will have," she said, "our time. If time allows."

He looked into her eyes and they reflected all the colors of the dawn.

Beta Lyrae Three. The name rolls off your tongue; the letters seemed to be arranged to be spoken. Beta Lyrae Three, with an internal alliteration. Listed in the Ephemris as being Earth-like, a good joke that. Earth-like only means that the ground, sky, trees, animals, insects, and weather won't unite into a homicidal hive-mind to consciously kill you. But that they'll each try to do it on their own. Survival just doesn't figure into it; after all, how many could survive on Earth itself, without the benefit of their environmental controls?

Bad enough, but there were natives. Natives may have all sorts of practices to welcome alien visitors, all of them can be spectacularly fatal. But it was Cinnabar's job to go down and contact them. We've already covered how she felt about that. If you use a tool long enough and hard enough, then right before it breaks it may only be good for that one chore. If it's sentient, it may even begin to look forward to being used.

Lync remained in the ship, in a circular orbit one hundred miles above Beta Lyrae Three. Cinnabar took a boat down to the surface to begin opening the first channels of communication between two races, courtesy of all those good genes she had.

She landed alone between one of the forests and one of the cities; it seemed the logical thing to do. She waited.

Nothing.

Then she decided it was time. She called out with her mind. She was a telepath, but she could speak also. She had never tried to keep this secret from Lync, but she had seen no reason to mention it. And, naturally, he had never asked.

Someone says, "I'm a telepath." The natural reply, the usual answer is, "Prove it. Read my mind."

How many people would say to a telepath, "Prove it. Say something to me"? Not very many. People have all they can do to live with just one set of thoughts in their heads.

She called: *Friend. Friend. Come. Talk. Friend.*

Short symbols, no words only ideas.

The other side of her mind scanned around itself, without any effort on her part. She could feel her mind spinning and twisting, being drawn to receive other thoughts, other beings. There was something out there, a questioning thought grasping at the ten-

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drils it had found in its own mind.

Friend Cinnabar thought. She concentrated to transmit her thoughts on the same frequency? wave? band? that the other part of her mind was receiving on. Finally, she had it. Her mind, both sides, bent like a leaf towards the sunlight.

A reply came to her. Hazy, not fully understood. But immediately she realized there was something wrong, something she had never encountered before, something she had never dared to hope for. Something wrong?

The reply became stronger and multivoiced. It was as if it was being reinforced time after time. It echoed and re-echoed within her. Obscure, yet imploring. Distant, but with her.

Something wrong? She smiled and laughed. She drove herself to the limits of her powers. "Here," she shouted out loud, still laughing, "here!"

The ship circled the world. Lync stood at the controls. Cinnabar's laughter filled the control room, from a speaker on one of the panels.

Lync turned, disturbed by the hatch opening behind him. It was Four.

"What are you doing on the bridge?" he asked. "You haven't been sent for. Are you malfunctioning?"

Four seemed unsure of himself, interesting in a robot. He wheeled back and forth around the room, like a man or a lion pacing.

"No. All circuitry is intact. I have a suggestion."

"Robots," Lync reminded him, "don't make suggestions."

Four continued to talk, ignoring his captain. "Get her away from there. Send me down to bring her back, or go yourself. Something is wrong. I have a premonition."

"You're relieved of duty. Report to your power-niche and remain there for the duration of the voyage. You are malfunctioning."

"Don't be fortune's fool," Four said, his voice filled with static, "fly now. While there is time."

"Leave," Lync said harshly. "That's an order."

"I'm sorry," Four said, "I have acted illogically. You are right, of course, there must be a fault in my circuits. But still, but still —" He turned and left.

Lync returned to monitoring the controls. Twenty-four hours, he thought. Twenty-four hours and his orders were to join her, as by then first contact should be established.

It already seemed a long day. A very long day.

They were wearing blue and gold loincloths. They were humanoid.

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Friends. Cinnabar thought.

And her world changed.

The humanoids formed an intricate pattern around her. Suddenly, their bodies became designs in a larger matrix, their waving arms turned motion into poetry, and poetry into a dance.

Cinnabar listened to the music of the dance. Emotions, alien but familiar, flowed around and around her, but softly, gently. She felt her own mind go out to them and blend with the whole. She held her arms out to them, and as the dance and the minds called for it, she whirled about raising her arms high and sinuously above her head. Like a ballerina on ice, like Diana in the forest glen, she danced. She danced, she danced. She *danced.*

"I'm home," she whispered, "I'm home." She danced faster and then faster. The wind whipped at the branches of the nearby trees, and the movement of their leaves was accentuated and embellished by the dance. One of the leaves fell from its branch and floated until it settled into Cinnabar's flowing hair, where it became a streak of russet whipped through the streamered air.

One mind touched hers, caressingly, and she answered. Another mind, and another. They were all the same, and they were all different. They were a part of her, and her of them.

"Telepaths," Cinnabar said while she laughed and danced. "You're all telepaths and I'm not alone any more."

She cried, she laughed, she sang, and she wept. And she danced, her body controlled, coaxed, by one mind, one hive-mind; and she was a part of that mind. She was a part of the dance.

After a time (times?) the dance slowed, and the dancers began to drift back into the forest. Soothing thoughts of reassurance came to her; she knew they would return. They would not abandon her, any more than she could abandon them.

Soon she was again alone. Reaction gripped her, and she shivered in the cool night air. Exhaustion dropped her on her knees, and she leaned her forehead against the bole of a tree.

The communicator buzzed in her ear.

Lync's voice came to her, tinnily, distorted by distance and transmission. "What happened? You didn't report. Are you all right? I'm not supposed to join you for another hour, but I can be with you in fifteen minutes if you need me."

"It's all right," Cinnabar replied. "I've established contact. Yes. Contact."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not going back, Lync." She steadied her voice. "Not ever."

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"What?"

"They're like me, Lync. Telepaths, an entire race. I will never be alone again, ever."

"I didn't realize you were still alone," he said.

"Lync, I'm tired, I didn't mean that. Of course, you'll stay here with me, say you will. Together, it will be wonderful. Together."

"I'll be right down there. I have a fix on you, don't leave that spot. Don't worry, everything will be all right."

"Lync, nothing's wrong. Everything's right. We won't have to run. You understand, Lync?"

There was no answer. She leaned back against the tree and closed her eyes. She thought that he would be with her soon and she could explain. The thought comforted her, and she slept.

She dreamed of dancing.

It had been a week since Lync had joined her. In that time they had set up a rude shelter, a lean-to of tree limbs, and they had just begun to realize that they were now on their own, that their future was theirs alone.

They were happy, for the most part, and that was a new and unique experience for them. Cinnabar had changed from being a beautiful, troubled girl and had matured into a truly delightful person. Her faculty of reading emotion had metamorphosed from a personal torture into an interpersonal wonder. She would read Lync's moods and plan her actions to please him. For if he was pleased, how could she help but feel likewise?

But there was always the same argument, the same worry, that lingered on their horizon.

"I think," Lync said one day as the setting suns were slowly turning their forest to gold, "I think we should find them, go to them."

She would always pretend innocence at that question, no matter how many times it had been answered for her previously.

"Who, Lync?" She watched the sunset, her face bathed in the gold.

"Your natives," Lync replied. Then, reasonably, "If we're going to be living with them, on their world, we should at least have met them by now. If they're like you tell it, they should know we're here, they should have been here by now."

"They know. They'll be here, all in good time."

He turned to her, and for a moment, as the golds played across her face, he imagined they were back in the lounge under the stars. But it was only the sunset, and the feeling of *deja vu* soon left him.

"Yes," he agreed, "it has been good," but the tone of his voice was unsure. "But I worry. After all, I was trained to worry. Those types of lessons are hard to forget,

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even if they may not be needed."

But, he thought, he was with Cinnabar, and he would not worry. As he thought that, he saw a smile fleet across her features.

He smiled in return, and they slept.

She woke to the dance.

The figures whirled about her. Dozens, scores, all moving together in their unearthly, natural rhythms. She smiled and rose. She looked for Lync, but the dancers hid him from her, weaving in and out of her sight. Their emotions flooded through her, cascading along her mind. The dance was again in control, and she gave herself to it gladly. Faster they danced and to even more intricate patterns, but her body moved gracefully and surely controlled by the thoughts and directions of the others.

A circle of dancers formed around her, and she spun in the middle as its pivotal center. It widened, and as the radius grew larger, the circumference revolved slower. Soon she was able to see between the gaps as the dancers moved further and further apart.

She could see now.

She screamed in horror at what she saw, and, futilely, she tried to break through the imprisoning circle to Lync's side. Lync was encompassed by a dozen natives. But those who moved in around him were not dressed in the arboreal garbs of the dancers but wore strange clothing and carried what were obviously weapons.

She called to him but couldn't hear his reply. His own circle was closing in on him, but his was not of dancers.

And still, around her, the dance continued.

She laughed but realized the hysteria that was threatening her. She had one weapon, her mind.

Stop she flung the thought viciously around her. Still they danced and the others were now closer to Lync.

Then the thoughts of the dancers came to her; they could share no words, but emotion was plain. A feeling of regret, of utmost sorrow, and underlying that, a bedrock of necessity.

She fell to her knees; ripples of agony tore through her, red and painful and yet familiar. Under all the pain she could read what they were doing. They were sending her own mind-thoughts back to her, those that she had been relaying to them. And along with her own mind was an overlay of another's. One she could not help but relay to them.

The colors of it ripped at her like knives within her skull. Nausea and fear drove her prone on the ground, that and a knowledge she couldn't face. But they wouldn't relent; they had to explain.

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Red for greed.
Black for fear.
Yellow for lust.
Crimson for hate.
Green for deceit.

And with it all, the pain of knowing. Her eyes were tearful and her face was contorted into hard, muscular lines. Her mind locked to the alien frequency and refused to let go. She tried to pull back as if from a crevasse, but gravity pulled her irresistibly forth.

She could hear Lync, as if in a dream, a dream of a world with no pain. He was shouting at her to leave, run, to save herself. This struck her as absurdly funny, and she laughed, not knowing she was crying. The ground pressed up against her and the sky weighed heavy upon her back. Inside of her, pressing to explode her skull, was all of the greed, hate, desire and fear. Not her own, one can live with his own. It was amplified and multiplied until it reached a level where pain mutated and became something —else, very nearly death itself.

She was alone; the dance had moved to the other side of their clearing. She raised her head from the ground but could not see Lync; the patterns hid him. Each second her mind, a nexus of agony, filled higher. She knew it was her time, her fate. She crawled. Every inch she moved was a sacred journey; every rock that scraped her, a crown of thorns. The knife Lync had used to cut wood beckoned to her like a star. She clutched at it but could not feel it in her hand.

She raised the knife and plunged it deep, deep, into her breast. The forest and the trees, the natives and the sky spun wildly. In the center of the kaleidoscope world was Lync. The pain abated as the grayness of nothingness closed over her.

She awoke and could feel Lync near her. She saw his mind and held it close to herself. She opened her eyes and was surprised at how weak she felt.

Lync's voice was barely louder than the soft whining of the ship's drive. "Don't talk," he said. They were again in the lounge, but the shutters were drawn and polarized, and his face glowed only in the white light of a fixture, light as white as from a moon.

"I've got to talk." The pain had left her mind and now was only in her body. But it was a relief to have pain she could understand.

"Don't," Lync said. "Four days, we'll be back. You'll need your strength."

"They wanted to kill you," she whispered, "and they had to. They could hear my mind, and part of my mind always listens to yours."

"I don't understand."

She forced herself to speak. She

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was beginning to fear silence.

"They listened to you from me. I had joined their hive-mind. My own mind had searched out theirs and formed a bridge, which even I could not break. Your mind could not have done that; you do not have this—this talent. Even they could not have found your mind on their own, but I had invaded their thoughts. Part of my mind is always listening to yours. I can't help that."

"You loved me," Lync said, not realizing he spoke in the past tense.

"Yes, I did. I will." She found now that her eyes were closed it was easier to talk. "Mistake. I forgot. Forgot what you were, what we all are. I either couldn't or wouldn't know. From my mind, they heard yours, and they showed me what it was to them. I had to stop my mind from receiving your own. They could hear me and not you, but I was between you both. I had to do it." She tried to open her eyes to see his face, but they were still closed. She could feel sleep before her.

"I had to get out from the middle. I had to give us time."

"Time," Lync repeated. His hand clutched hers. "Time."

"Lync," she coughed and wondered at the salt taste, "they wondered if someone like me could retain a human outlook. Tell them no, that I failed."

"It was success," he said, "but I'll tell them it was failure. They couldn't understand this success." He bent over her, and she forced her eyes open and tried to smile.

"He," she said, "was even blinder than I." She was surprised that she could still laugh.

"Don't," Lync said, "don't." She felt his other hand caress her forehead.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments," she quoted. "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds. He was wrong, Lync. Love must change, must alter both what is loved and that which loves." For a moment her voice was strong, steady, melodious. "Remember, Lync, how I changed and altered to love. No matter what, remember that ours was that marriage. Remember."

She felt Lync's arms around her and she was comfortable. She knew that she could sleep, that he understood.

For a while Lync sat motionless by her side. Then he stood and silently, slowly, opened the shutters of the lounge. The stars blazed in and their light flickered about her like candles, like jewels, like lovers.

He held her hand and watched the stars. For a long time he sat there. Finally, after one wheeling star threw crimson red droplets across a background of pure white, he knew and he understood. ◄

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Carter Wilson is 28, lives in Cambridge, is the author of two novels, CRAZY FEBRUARY *and* I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT, *and one book for children,* ON FIRM ICE. *He writes: "In the past the spicy things I did were: 1. attended Harvard, 2. did work in anthropology with Mayan Indians. The last years I've taught writing at Stanford, Harvard and Tufts and wrote and produced a documentary film about Mexico." His first story for F&SF is a small gem; it's sort of a cautionary tale that you might want to pass on to a friend who's been taking the men's magazines too seriously.*

The Brief, Swinging Career of Dan and Judy Smythe

by Carter Wilson

IN CAMBRIDGE WHERE THEY came from, Dan and Judy Smythe were known as a couple who got the lay of the land very quickly. At the new university in the San Fernando Valley where Dan had his appointment in Classics, they soon saw they were being forced to choose up sides. Judy noticed that at parties the displaced Easterners clung in dark cabalistic circles inside, damning the West and trying to recreate a New Haven or New York of the mind. The people who were willing to commit themselves to the new life made their light, laughing conversations out on the flagstone patios, admiring the hibiscus, the neon blue of the descending evening, and themselves.

The patio people, Judy noted to Dan, had tenure or were about to get it. The others not.

But Dan and Judy had many reasons for throwing themselves into California life with such abandon. They were essentially optimistic young people, in love with their young bodies and their new prosperity and possessions, and just past the crest of their

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first great, comfortable married love. Falling wholeheartedly into California life extended their pleasure with each other beyond the period their affection might otherwise have had.

Judy's copy of Julia Child gathered dust, and her *Sunset Cookbook* got thumbed and thumbed, and bits of batter and goo appeared on many of its pages. Dan stood outside one night while the dinner guests tinkled away merrily behind him and noted he could now produce cooking coals on the hibachi in seventeen minutes flat. He found that he was childishly pleased with this skill, something back in Cambridge he would not have dreamed he might ever want. In his old life Dan had wanted most to write a relatively popular but deeply scholarly book on the images of decadence to be found in the Later Empire Poets. Now the book had moved down several spaces on Dan's list of dreams.

Their guests, Herbert and Angela Ingiless, were telling Judy that last year thirty-one people in the Valley died of illnesses attributed to smog. It was a story Dan and Judy had heard before and assiduously refused to believe.

"Brandy in the den," Dan announced. "It's an Old California Custom, which means we did it last year too."

The Ingilesses were good folk, of the kind who blossom when they at last find California. Herbert, slightly older, was a professor of African history. He had a passing interest in the Roman sites he had seen in Tunis and, hence, in what little Dan knew about Empire history. Angela was desirable and looked dissipation-prone. The Ingilesses had recently returned from a sabbatical in Kenya where, Angela said, they had collected many interesting things which the Smythes just *had* to come over and see.

For Christmas Judy gave Dan a subscription to an underground newspaper called *The Androgynous Valley*. "If you're going to be a *real* pornographer," she said, "you'll need those ads in the back."

"Oh, come now," Dan said, "I may buy an erotic book from time to time, but who looks at them before bedtime? Who?"

"I'm just trying to share your hobbies," Judy said.

Though each read the classified ads assiduously and in secret, Dan and Judy of course never thought of answering any of them. For a while it merely pleased them to believe that in all the twinkling bungalows around them lurked pedophiliacs and Nikon-carrying voyeurs and worse.

One night when there were guests, in the dark Dan tripped over the damned hibachi, upsetting the red coals and spraining his ankle. The doctor said luckily

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he hadn't broken anything, that heat would reduce the swelling and a masseur might be a very good idea.

Dan asked if maybe Judy couldn't be shown how to massage his ankle, but the doctor shook his head and said no, he meant a real professional, and Dan decided to stick to a heating pad.

But when he got home after his evening seminar on Catullus and limped into the living room, he found a strange, puritanically slim and wiry young man in rimless spectacles waiting to knead and pull the painfully knotted sinews and cords of his ankle. At first Dan was leery of even such a small intimacy (the young man had suggested music while he worked and had selected Josquin Desprez for the stereo), but by the time the half hour was up, Dan was rather daydreaming of those supple, hard hands soothing the rest of him.

The young man told Dan he should take more acid and then his body wouldn't get so uptight.

"Where did *he* come from?" Dan asked when the masseur had been paid and had zoomed off into the hazy dark in his VW.

"Alyosha? I got him for you through the paper," Judy said. "His ad was called 'No Kinks Too Great,' but he turned out to be the straightest of the ones I talked to."

Dan felt wonderment, as though Judy had been trafficking in forbidden commodities behind his back for years and years, and he was filled with admiration.

That spring they went to a group marathon symposium at a motel in Palm Springs where everyone, including the therapist, groped each other underwater in the well-heated motel pool. Judy had a good time and thought the weekend improved the quality of their relationship, though she was disappointed by the sensation of underwater touching, which was mild. When he realized Judy was the most desirable woman at the marathon, Dan was both happy and sad. They stopped short at trading partners, which some of the other couples, including the therapist and his wife, did.

One night Dan looked up and discovered his wife waiting coyly for him to get to something in *The Androgynous Valley*. She had gotten into the playful habit of marking with a red check items in papers and magazines and sex manuals which she thought might amuse him. When he found what she had checked now, Dan said, "It's bad Latin, at least."

"But it might be good fun."

"Do you think so?"

"I thought it would be right up your alley."

The red-checked item read: DUO SWINGENDUM. Classics-minded young hetero couple seeks likes for lively Roman feasting.

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Sincere only. Photo if you have. No joke. P.O. Box 288 AV.

"What do you think it would be like? Seriously, Dan."

"Togas improvised out of bedsheets, crushing grapes in each others' navels, that sort of thing," he said.

"Oh."

And he didn't hear another word about it—although he noticed the ad continued to run for the next two weeks—until Judy broke the news to him.

"Know who the Swinging Duo turn out to be?"

"No—Batman and Robin?"

"No—Herbert and Angela."

"No!" A man about to be considered for his permanent job, Dan thought. Risking it all at this stage of his career.

"Angela said she was so glad *we* answered. She had been meaning to have us for dinner for a long time anyway."

"But you didn't accept."

"Of course, silly."

"Oh." Dan thought of putting his foot down; he thought of Angela Ingiless in her blue-knit with the no-bra, and asked if they were supposed to bring anything and when it was to be.

The excitement of the new experience showed in the Ingilesses' flushed faces and maybe, Dan thought, in theirs' too. Herbert was wearing a corny laurel wreath around his head and a pink bedsheet. Predictable. Dan complimented Angela on her safety-pinned sari and tinkling gold bangles, and she, leading him through a house decorated in Zebra skins and ebony masks, said she wouldn't be wearing them for long.

"Can we do that without disturbing the neighbors?" Dan asked.

"Oh, yes. See—" They stood at the picture window and looked down on the sunken backyard and the blue, light-flooded pool. The entire area was enclosed by a board fence, perhaps twelve or fifteen feet high. "—Herbert and I were into sunbathing a long time since, so we're perfectly prepared," Angela said sweetly.

At the deep end of the pool a nude concrete lady unendingly spilled her vase into the water. "But let me show you something," Herbert said, and went galloping off to the shed where it seemed the heating unit and valves were housed. Almost as soon as Herbert disappeared into the shed there was a frightening clanking and a roar, and the water stopped trickling from the lady's vase and gushed from between her concrete thighs. Herbert reappeared guffawing and togaless.

In a trice Angela was out of her sari and into the water. Judy followed and Dan shucked off his clothes more slowly, careful to fold his socks inside his shoes for future reference.

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"Emperor! Emperor!" Angela called from the shallow end. "How about some vino?"

"I'd say thumbs up to that," Herbert giggled and started plump-ended for the house.

Dan slunk crocodile-like into the pool, caught his unsuspecting wife from behind, and bit her earlobe.

"Me too, me too!" cried Angela, pushing through waist-high water to get to him. Judy didn't seem to mind when he kissed Angela and rubbed up against her.

"This is always such *fun*," Angela said. "I'll go get the deviled *usque* and the feasting can commence. *Usque,* 'eggs,' isn't that right, Danny?"

"Sure," he said, thinking, Bad Latin but lovely breasts.

Angela went into the house and dried herself off, put on a bathrobe and joined Herbert at the picture window. He had already poured the wine and turned on the floodlights. Dan and Judy Smythe were embracing at the shallow end, rather forced about it. They seemed aware someone was watching them. The Ingilesses toasted each other in honeyed zinfandel.

"Where's Alexander?"

"I haven't let him out yet."

"Can I do it?"

"Of course, my dear."

Angela had never actually pressed the button herself before. When she did, she could hear a faint buzzing as the electric bolt on the shed sprang open.

Alexander took his time about coming out, probably the floodlights bothered his great, hungry eyes.

When they saw him, Dan and Judy began at first very softly to call things like, Oh, my good God! and Jesus, dear gentle Jesus! and then louder, Judy, what have you gotten me into! and It's a prank, Dan, a prank! Herbert? Angela? Just stay in the water, Dan, he won't come in the water. They hate water. Oh, sweet Jesus!

Alexander prowled around the pool several times and then sat down to wait for it to finish draining. He shook his long silky mane and lapped at the water expectantly, as though to hurry things along.

"Well," Herbert said, "I wouldn't say thumbs up to them. Very poor show."

Dan and Judy were clutched against each other, sobbing now.

"No," Angela agreed, "thumbs down on them. Phooey on them, I say."

Only once had they seriously considered using the horsemeat they always kept ready. That was with a sweet little couple named Hinton. When the water got down to the Hintons' knees and Alexander crouched, the Hintons got religion all of a sudden and started loudly singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" in unison. ◄

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Richard Lupoff is a 35-year-old native New Yorker who now lives in Poughkeepsie, where he writes films for IBM. He's had a variety of sf and fantasy published during the past several years (also one novel, ONE MILLION CENTURIES*) and had a non-fiction book,* EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS, MASTER OF ADVENTURE, *out in 1965. He says that the story below is an effort to "take a very standard situation and do the whole thing up in a splendid, colorful, mythic style," and we think it succeeds admirably.*

THE WIZARD OF ATALA

by Richard A. Lupoff

AFTER LONG AND LONG, Suvellus withdrew his head from the thinning fumes that still rose lazily above the sputtering coals of the blackened iron brazier. Wisps of the grey-white gas clung to his thick locks and lengthy beard, giving the appearance that they arose from some source within his crimson mage's garb rather than in the leaves and stalks that lay now in ashes before him.

The men of Lord Judge surrounding Suvellus drew back in fear and anticipation of the words to be spoken: gruff Yao-tchall, battle-scarred admiral of Lord Judge's vrill-powered fleet; ambitious Ninantor of the jeweled helm; the youthful Dondus, his unruly mane cascading about his shoulders with each move.

"Now, sorcerer," tall Dondus demanded impetuously, "what saw you in the Land where Man walks not?"

Suvellus gazed about the marble-floored chamber as a man not fully wakened from a dream or trance, as indeed he was. Upright but tottering, he clung to the strong arm of his questioner for support, and spoke in a voice thinned by age and parched with fumes: "They come, they come," he proclaimed. "Their gleaming craft cleave the skies, their trails stream behind like flames of emerald and jade. Beneath them as they pass, the Roquis and the Tacans, the Avajones and the Chimutls hide in terror or worship in awe.

"But they care not for the men

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of the Middle Continent. They come to bring destruction to Atala. The kingdoms of Cataya must rend Atala from the face of the sea, or they will themselves die of shame. The men of Cataya must reign in splendor, supreme in the world. They can bear no peer nor better. Atala must be prepared to defend itself or it will be crushed by the Catayans."

"Never!" cried Yao-tchall, his rough features contorting with rage. "I shall personally lead Lord Judge's fleet into battle. Between the shores of the Middle Continent and Atala's westerly coast we shall meet the Catayans. They cannot reach Atala without passing above our straits. We shall meet them in battle and blast them from the heavens!"

"You shall not," the sorcerer replied. "Your weapons are built to engage sea craft like your own. The men of the Middle Continent venture not toward Atala, but did they, their craft of bark and twigs would be easy prey for you, Yao-tchall. And the savages of Yorpa are as children before your ships. And the kingdoms of Afric care little for the world beyond their shores. But the Catayans—the Catayans, will pass high over your ships while you watch helplessly from the waters below."

"Then let them! Let them!" burst in young Dondus. "The men of Atala will rally to the serpent and falcon of Lord Judge. Let the invading Catayans land, they will be met by thousands of fierce soldiers happy to offer their lives to preserve Atala and Lord Judge! Swordsmen, lensmen, spearmen, slingsmen, all the strength of Atala will descend on the invaders! No Catayan will survive even to bear word of their defeat back to their bloodthirsty masters!"

"Fool!" the sorcerer cried, "child in man's armor! Where think you the Catayans will land? Conveniently in the face of Atala's defenders? Will they respond to an invitation to land and meet Lord Judge's army? If they choose to meet our force at all, they will sit smug and safe in their sky ships and drop their burning chemicals or focus their killing rays on the army below."

Then spoke Ninantor, his face hidden in the jewels and filigree of his glittering helm, Ninantor who had remained silent while the others spoke. "Let the Catayans land," he said softly. "Let them come from their sky ships. Let all of Atala seem to welcome them gladly, as friends and deliverers from the tyranny of Lord Judge."

He paused and turned to each of the others, waiting for an answer to his words, but of answer he received none. Anger shone in the face of Yao-tchall, fury that revolted at the suggestion of cowardly surrender, but he did not

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speak. Puzzlement shone forth from the eyes of Dondus, the long waves of his hair shaking as he moved his head, waiting for the rest of the statement of Ninantor, but Dondus did not speak. And Suvellus, fully recovered now from the trance of the fumes, stood slender and erect in his mage's robe of scarlet silk. But even Suvellus did not speak.

Moments charged with quivering tension crept by, then Ninantor resumed his speech. "Let them land, yes. Welcome them, let the Catayans feel that they are loved by the people of Atala. Lull them, soothe them, invite them into our homes. And then, when they are no longer alert, when they lay down their arms and turn naked to the bath, the feast, the couch—then Atala will rise and fall on them and destroy them."

In the silence of the marble-floored room Ninantor gazed triumphantly at Suvellus, at Dondus, at Yao-tchall. Once more it was the mage who first spoke out. "A clever plan," he said, "devious as might be expected, Ninantor, and ingenious in its way." He paused and wrung out his beard. A last wisp of grey-white fumes emerged and floated slowly toward the dome-like ceiling of the chamber.

"But the Catayans are too many. And too wary. I fear that before they would disarm themselves they would disarm the citizens of Atala. Before they would go naked to the bath they would set watchers to prevent such treachery as you foresee, citizen Ninantor. And Lord Judge, by the practice of the Catayans, would first be taken hostage and held for guarantee of their safety. Did you not know that, friend Ninantor?" explained the mage.

What look passed over the features of the other was hidden by the glittering jewels anl fine metals of his helm, and all that was heard of his voice was an angry snort and a brief speech: "What then, ancient? What good are your potions and your spells, your visions of the Land where Man walks not? You tell us of doom, of doom, and of doom again. Tell us once instead of victory and how we can obtain it, and cry no more of doom if you would have us listen."

"A good point, Ninantor," intoned the seer. "I will meditate upon it and answer you by the change of the watch. Meanwhile the Catayans, confident in their might, come but slowly, and allow us thus to form our plans for their confounding. So now, do you all three as I say. Admiral, to your charges. We will not likely need their arms, but none knows all that is to be, and it will do no ill to prepare.

"Councilor, to the Lord Judge. Advise him of all that you have heard and have said, and plead

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his presence when next we assemble.

"Youth, to your fellows or to the maidens, as of your choice. Fill well the short time of which you are assured, so that if there is more you will have started it well, and if there is not more, you at least have joyed in the time given to you."

"And you, wizard?" the captain of sailors asked.

Suvellus fixed him with a sharp and steady gaze. "I shall go where others go not. I shall see what others see not. I shall think thoughts of a texture not held by other brains. And I shall return, if I am not stranded beyond hope of rescue, with the salvation of Lord Judge's Atala!"

Hearing this the three departed, each proceeding separately to perform the task given of the seer. Suvellus betimes remained on the floor of marble beneath a vaulted dome, engaged in urgent research.

Above the gilt and obsidian streets of Vulca, chief city of Atala, brilliant azure skies faded to turquoise, to ultramarine, as the day-star lowered slowly behind westerly tree-crested peaks. As purple and golden rays faded, a huge and coppery disk arose in the east, casting a glow of reddened silver onto tower and stadium, high road and hovel alike.

On city wall and at city gate plumed and helmeted guardsmen replaced comrades more tired by ennui than by their minimal and largely formal labors. Mounted guardsmen stepped their geldings to the rattle and thump of mounted drummers, while foot troops tramped to precise beats and presented weapons suited more to splendid show than to killing or defense.

Before the ancient and ornate quarters of the mage Suvellus there stood four men: one rough-visaged and garbed in the dark tones of a naval chieftian, one slim and restless with features hidden in jeweled helm, one young and mighty with rumpled mane and open face, and one more, Lord Judge, defender of Atala, high captain of Vulca, chief of arts, ruler of the occult sciences, regal puissance of land and of sea.

Alone and unnoticed by his subjects, by decree of Atalan tradition he could walk the streets of Vulca, ride the highways of his domain as one unnoticed and unrecognized.

This night the four beat ceremoniously, each in his turn, upon the gates of the house of the sorcerer. And when each had beaten thus upon the gate, Lord Judge himself pushed aside its ornate panels and strode with his men into the house, down corridor and through passageway to debouch finally into the dome-ceilinged and marble-floored chamber wherein awaited them Suvellus,

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scarlet robed and white bearded.

The mage greeted them in subdued tones, acknowledging the prerogatives of Lord Judge with the sign of his hands; the others even less formally he gestured to carven seats arranged once again surrounding the brazier, which glowed a dull and eery red in the center of the room. When they had seated themselves, Lord Judge questioned the seer:

"You have seen the Catayans?"

Suvellus gave his *Aye.*

"There is no doubt of their intent?"

Again the wizard gave affirmation.

"And you hold, soothsayer, that neither the powerful ships nor the brave youth nor the serpentine craft of Atala can stave off the destruction of our land and our people?"

"So it is," replied Suvellus, "and so this day did I tell these, Lord Judge's esteemed, Yao-tchall, Ninantor, Dondus." As he spoke, the wizard swept a bony arm in a great circle, compassing Lord Judge and his three men.

Lord Judge stiffened in his seat. He drew himself to his regal height, his face gave back a look of struggling anger and despair in the ruddy glow of the iron brazier. At length he demanded more of the seer:

"I choose not my councilors to lead me weeping to my fate, mage Suvellus, nor to warn me of evil I cannot avoid. Your task has ever been to warn me of peril that I might lead Atala to safety. Surely your many years and your strange customs have not so degraded your high powers as to turn you to a mere—" he paused and curled his lip in disdain, "—doomsman. Of such Atala has seen too many!"

Again replied Suvellus, "Nay, Lord Judge. In truth I warned of the menace now passing over the Middle Continent. In truth I warned your three men that their plans to preserve Atala could lead only to tragic defeat. But hopeless I am not.

"I have visioned and I have ventured. I have seen and I have learned. Heroism and tragedy will transpire this night, but by the rising of tomorrow's sun the turn of this matter shall be made. The menace of the Catayans will be ended—or the doom of Atala shall be sealed. One or the other . . . by the rising of the sun."

Now more than ever did emotions play in contention upon the visage of Lord Judge: doubt combated hope; fear, courage; mystery, faith. At last by voice and gesture he signed Suvellus to explain, and the mage, his face and hair made to match the color of his garment by brazier glow, spoke:

"Where neither flesh not artifact can travel, there can still travel those who know the way and dare the way. I can share my

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knowledge; Lord Judge's men may share my strange customs. There is a way that I know and will share, to leave behind the self's organic home and travel to meet the Catayan foe, thus to contest this threat to Atala high above the Middle Continent.

"Only part of the outcome has been given to me thus far. I know only this: that cowardice, weakness, and foolishness shall defeat bravery, strength, and wit. Would Lord Judge permit, I will myself undertake to challenge the approaching Catayans myself, and ask Lord Judge's men to assist me as I direct."

But before Lord Judge did make known his will, his three men gave vent to protest of Suvellus' plan. Yao-tchall, claiming Atala's navy as ever her sturdy buckler, standing between the great land and her enemies, claimed right to undertake the task. Before even he finished his plea giant Dondus rose to dispute, claiming for Atala's strengthy youth the right to act as javelin rather than buckler, and meet attack with attack, not defense.

Face hidden, Ninantor pled last, claiming Yao-tchall could not bring with him ship or sailor, nor Dondus tendon or blade, but that he, Ninantor, could bring with himself his chiefest weapon and tool, his quick mind and intricate thought, and thus best meet the men of Cataya.

Now rose Lord Judge from his place, and pacing round about the seats of the four, wizard, captain, soldier, schemer, he rubbed his temples in perplexity at the puzzle.

And now halted Lord Judge, facing the four and pointing his own straight finger at Suvellus, saying, "Can you not send all, wizard, either journeying along to lead their way, or remaining in Vulca here as the needs of your craft dictate?"

But the mage shook his head and told Lord Judge, "It cannot be thus. But one can go at any time, and while he is gone all others must remain behind. Will Lord Judge agree, I shall instruct the three in the duties of those who remain, which are but simple and few at most, and then I shall depart from here to work for Atala's saving."

"You shall not go, wizard," gave back Lord Judge. "Should one attempt fail, another must be made. For this I wish you here. As for the three, I have heard the claims of all to journey first, and see a portion of wisdom and a part of justice in the claim of each. Still, decision must be made, and I as Lord Judge must make it.

"So then, my captain sailor, my old defender and defender of Atala, Yao-tchall, my veteran of many battles, you shall be the first to try. Do you, I command, as Suvellus would that you do. Meet

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our foe. Save our land once more if you can. This is my choice."

The sailor moved from his seat, facing Lord Judge, and made with both hands the sign Suvellus had earlier made, indicating acceptance of Lord Judge's authority and of his decision. Then he turned and stood facing the seer Suvellus and said, "As you will, wizard, instruct me and I go!"

So the mage Suvellus instructed Yao-tchall, watching all the time for sign of fear in the other's face, and there saw he fear but also a stern will to permit fear no power over Yao-tchall's doing. Suvellus went to a far corner of the room, where brazier glow reached but feebly, and the others could see not what he did nor from whence he brought back stalks and twigs and leaves of an unusual type, but bring them he did.

He placed them in the brazier and blew gently until they began to smolder and singe, upon which wisps of fume began to rise, grey mostly but tinted with odd and surprising shades of pink, yellow, orange, red. Suvellus then motioned to Yao-tchall to bend his face over the brazier while the wizard drew a cloak-like hanging sleeve of his own garment over the head of the captain and over the brazier, to trap within it the fumes rising.

For a time in the chamber there was heard only the deep inhalations and slow exhalations of the sailor, and the low voice of the wizard murmuring to him. Now a shudder would seize the frame of Yao-tchall, and now again, until Suvellus motioned to the two others of the men of Lord Judge to come and support the sea warrior. Quickly they did, and at Suvellus's silent urging lifted the body of Yao-tchall and carried it from near the brazier, and laid it upon the floor, where it lay as the body of one deep in trance.

But to Yao-tchall, seeing this was as a great mystery, for even as he watched the youth Dondus and the crafty Ninantor laying his form down, he was himself present, able to see and hear the doings of the others, and surely he was not carried and laid upon the floor. But quickly his surprise diminished and quickly he remembered, or began to remember, the murmured words of Suvellus, and as he remembered his mission and his instructions he rose gently, silently, swiftly, toward the gilt and ornately carven dome that ceilinged the room.

And as he reached the dome he halted not, but continued to rise, feeling the material of the ceiling passing somehow around himself, or himself through it, much as he had often felt the spray of stormy seas on his face and body as vrill-driven seacraft had beaten through rough waters.

And now he was free entire of the building, and looked down

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upon the roof of Suvellus's house, and found himself strangely able to see, as his will directed, both the roof of the building giving back the bright glow of moonlight, and the scene within, the brazier glowing still and the last of the twigs and leaves within it falling to dusty ashes, and the regal Lord Judge in questioning posture as Suvellus leaned forward to explain some point of sorcery, while Ninantor and Dondus listened passively, casting occasional glances behind at the unmoving form that Yao-tchall had so shortly inhabited.

Higher he rose, casting sight over all the streets and buildings, parks and streams that wandered like gentle but untamed creatures freely through all of Vulca. The palace of Lord Judge he saw, its guardsmen splendidly dressed and fiercely equipped with unworking weapons. The temples he saw and the pleasure houses where youths trained in the beauty of their forms danced in flickering patterns of light and artisans of music vied with those of scent to provide the greater delight for Vulcayans and for visitors from the hinterlands of Atala alike.

But again Yao-tchall rose, and by moonlight and familiar countryside made his way silently and effortlessly through the sky of night, westward toward the land of the Middle Continent and the slowly moving aerial fleet of Cataya.

At last, having passed sea and beach, swamp and plain and mountain range, forest and river and desert, high over mountain again he saw them, the sky ships of Cataya. A dull silver and green-of-jade they were, at first mere specks in the night heaven, then larger and more clear as they in their flight and Yao-tchall in his silent movement drew together.

Like barges they were, wide, very long, and shallow. At the prow of each a figurehead of some Catayan beast: a dragon, scaled, winged, its nostrils arched and mouth drawn open, serpent-like tongue protruding its twin forks; a fierce Beipingan warrior hound, its ruff of curly fur expanded to protect throat and neck, its rows of fangs bared in defiance of any foe; a giant falcon, fierce eyes glinting to observe the approach of enemies, its cruelly hooked beak ready to pierce and rend the softer flesh of any who resisted. These, all these and more.

And Yao-tchall, approaching close and more close aroused not any notice or response in the Catayan sailors and officers, yet as he made to hover beside a serpent-prowed craft he did feel a curious sort of kinship for these sailors whose ships sailed drily through the skies rather than through water. Sailors still they were, and ships still they were, and to Yao-tchall the strangeness of the scene

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was less than the strangeness of Suvellus's chamber.

Still Yao-tchall did bring himself closer and closer to the serpent ship, seeing Catayans at their work upon her deck, understanding the tasks of some and wondering at the meaning of others. And now he moved once more through a door despite its being closed, feeling the substance of its metal and wood as he had felt the substance of Suvellus's house in Vulca.

Within was a desk covered with papers, books and scrolls and half-familiar-seeming charts of portions of the world little known to Atala. There was a chair before the desk, and a bunk beside it, and in the bed or rather lying fully clothed upon it but nonetheless deep sunk in slumber, a Catayan of middle years and gristled mien, a man, thought Yao-tchall, not very unlike himself.

Yao-tchall remained a moment studying the Catayan, then entered the body of the sleeper, feeling at once the familiar feel of embodiment, of limb and of torso, of body and of head. Quickly he realized that he had taken command of the sleeper, had gained the knowledge of the man. He knew his name, his status, his language; he knew the meanings of the documents in the closed room and the intent of the Catayan fleet.

He raised the body of the Catayan to a seated position on the edge of the bunk, rose to his feet, but then sat again in the chair. Yao-tchall pondered briefly, planning his actions, then once again rose and left the cabin for the deck of the serpent-headed barge.

And now misfortune overcame Yao-tchall the Atalan: success turned to disaster and courage to fear.

For Yao-tchall upon the serpent's deck called to himself the officers of the barge, and conversed with them, and revealed to them in their own tongue his true identity. He spoke to them of the might of Atala and was rebuffed by word of Cataya's might. He spoke to them of the sea-fleet of his nation and was outsaid of the might of the sky-fleet of Cataya. He told of tens of thousands of brave men, and was told of tens of millions; he told of war beasts, weapons and vehicles, and was told in reply of each and more.

True and bravely he spoke, but of what he heard he knew in some way also that he heard truth, and might for might, craft for craft, courage for courage, he knew that Cataya was more strengthy than was the land of his own birth. And as he heard and as he learned, Yao-tchall grew doubtful of his cause and fearful for his land, and as he grew less strengthy in his manner so grew the Catayans more strengthy in theirs, and as he grew less sure-

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some so grew they more so, until at last falling to his knees in terror, the hitherto unhumbled Yao-tchall begged that Cataya grant mercy to his land, but without reply they slew him.

In Vulca in the domed chamber where sat silently four men, the red-robed Suvellus broke the silence with speech: "The sailor has failed," he said. "Lord Judge, the sailor has failed."

The ruler of all Atala asked not how his seer came by this word. Rising only, he walked to stand before lion-maned Dondus. Lord Judge placed hand upon the shoulder of the youth, and nodded, and Dondus too lowered head in acceptance of Lord Judge's will, and walked to stand beside the brazier while Suvellus crept into his darkened cupboard to bring again the leaves, twigs and stalks.

Again glowed the brazier, again rose the fumes. Again draped the seer his silken sleeve upon the mane of the youth to make a tent for the penning of the vapor, while Dondus breathed deep and held in his breath, then breathed deep again, and the voice of Suvellus rose and fell softly, below the comprehension of Lord Judge and the crafty Ninantor sitting yet in their seats of the night.

At last gestured the mage, and together monarch and councilor lifted the unmoving form of the muscled youth, and placed it gently beside that of Yao-tchall, now still as in death upon the marble floor.

But Dondus watched all, as had the sailor chief, and rose slowly, as had Yao-tchall, and looked down and back to see all of Vulca, and in time far more, and to move, as sooner had Yao-tchall, westerward, over plain and mountain and river and coast, over strait and again coast, to see distantly over the land of the night-dark Middle Continent, dragon, falcon, serpent and hound.

As had the sailor, young Dondus selected a Catayan craft and brought himself close to examine it. Its prow was the fierce head of the dragon of Catayan legend, its deck was covered with implements of bewildering variety. To Dondus the use of some was discomfortingly clear. At the purpose of others he could only guess, and in his guesses found not any joy for Atala.

High above the Middle Continent a gigantic moon cast bright light. Uncounted stars twinkled against blackness. No cloud marred the perfection of heaven. Below the Catayan fleet Dondus could see plains and valleys, rivers and lakes illumined to a ghostly beauty by the light from above.

And on the deck of the dragon barge, Catayans worked by a combination of the ambient light and greenly glowing lanterns hung at frequent intervals about the craft.

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The tunics and trousers of the air bargemen were in vivid contrast to the robes and graceful draping worn in Vulca.

Dondus moved within the hull of the dragon barge, feeling its substance as he would a mist or spray of fine sand as he passed through the palely verdant deck. Within the barge he moved from quarter to quarter until he reached a forecastle of sorts, where dozed Catayan sailors off watch, or sat manipulating small machines of unknown purpose, or knelt in a circle about a board, moving objects unknown also to Dondus.

He studied form and face of each person in the room. At length the Atalan youth found a drowsing sailor of form and age approximating his own and, following the instructions of Suvellus, entered the body of the Catayan. Dondus opened his new eyes, rose from his reclining position, and walked to a knot of sailors softly discussing matters of their day.

And now misfortune overcame Dondus the Atalan: success turned to disaster and strength to weakness.

By exhibit of his might and combat prowess Dondus attempted to gain domination of the forecastle, from there to seize the ship, in turn the fleet, and thus to end for Atala the menace of Catayan invasion. But the strength of his Catayan host was less than that of Dondus himself; the men of the forecastle grasped nothing of Dondus but thought their fellow a sudden berserker; Dondus fought to dominate but his new fellows needed only to subdue. While Dondus faced three foemen, holding them easily at bay, still others circled and darted. Dondus needs turn also. He has not wall behind him but enemy and is soon felled, going down into darkness and knowing as darkness envelops him that he has failed.

In Vulca in the domed chamber sat silently three men. The red-robed Suvellus broke long silence with this speech: "As the sailor, Lord Judge, so also the youth. The youth is beaten."

Lord Judge responded more slowly than he had before. Sighing and with hands to temples, he seemed to study an intricate pattern worked into the marble of the floor where narrow borders of metal separated polished stones of this color and that. At last he raised his head and lowered one hand. With the other he pointed at Ninantor, who sat motionlessly watching Lord Judge.

Lengthy moments remained the three unmoving, Lord Judge with pointed finger, Ninantor with hidden countenance pointed in return, Suvellus facing expressionless to the two. After a time Suvellus went silently again

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to his shadowy-shrouded cupboard and returned with laden hands. He placed his burden in the brazier and gestured imperiously to Ninantor, who sat as yet unmoved. Ninantor approached the brazier and waited for fumes to rise. Still he stood upright until Suvellus reached behind him and pressed him forward. Ninantor shrugged angrily away from the hand of the mage, but bent forward so that fumes entered and filled his helm. Almost at once he moved to back away from the rising vapor, but Suvellus pressed him sharply, and Ninantor bent again over the brazier, uttering a series of angry protests that faded away as Suvellus again recited his words.

At last as Ninantor grew limp and collapsed against the mage Suvellus, he gestured to Lord Judge, and the two of them carried the body of Ninantor to place it beside those of Yao-tchall and Dondus.

Longest of any Ninantor tarried in the house of Suvellus, but the three still forms, those of Yao-tchall, of Dondus, and his own, remained still, and the two that moved, Lord Judge and mage Suvellus, sat moving little more than the three others. At last, despairing of profit in this house, Ninantor rose and fled westerward, crossing land, sea, and land again.

Now before him came the fleet of Cataya, verdant trails glowing most vividly, then the craft themselves, serpent, dragon, falcon, hound, shining softly in the light of moon and stars, and in the emerald twinkle of flaring lanterns above dully silvered decks. Wily Ninantor moved slowly, unseen, reconnoitering the fleet. Each barge he studied, each form and movement.

At last he settled upon the greatest falcon barge, flagship of the Catayan commander. Ninantor moved about the craft, studying officer and gunner, artificer and navigator, messboy and intelligencer. Studying most the Catayan commander and his closest staff. At last Ninantor found his bodiless self attuned with one Catayan above all others: an advisor to the invading chief, sly, elderly, frail of body but devious of intellect, and now, to Ninantor's joy, dozing softly to spell his own weary frailty.

Carefully the Atalan intruded, insidiously insinuating himself into the brain of the sleeping Catayan, until at last he felt himself wholly in control of the sleeping body and its keen, packed mind. With a barely suppressed whoop Ninantor, rummaging through the storehouse of his host's disloyal brain, discovered the Catayan's plan to betray his own commander, to lead a party against his chief, to execute his commander on manufactured charges and proclaim a puppet in

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his place while he himself took secret control of the power of command. On the morrow, the fleet. Within the year—all of Cataya would be his!

Ninantor had not even the time to open his new eyes when his shoulder was roughly shaken and a truncheon plunged into his ribs. Only now did he realize the thoroughness of the internal security structure of Cataya. Only now it was too late to avoid the unravelment of his unwilling host's plan. And surely now it was folly and futility to deny his own identity, to claim to be a complete stranger in command of this Catayan self.

Quickly cast into irons and into disgrace, deemed now to be carried through battle and returned to Cataya for trial and certain punishment, only the frailty of the host body betrayed the brilliant minds mingled within, Catayan traitor and Atalan schemer. Rough treated and roughly cast into a makeshift cell in the hold of the barge, the body used by Ninantor quickly expired.

Thus did misfortune overcome Ninantor the Atalan: success turned to disaster and intelligence to futility.

In Vulca in the domed chamber sat silently two men. The red-robed Suvellus broke long silence with this speech: "The third as the other two, Lord Judge. Ninantor has also failed."

Now rose Lord Judge and strode to the bodies of the three, Yaotchall, Dondus, Ninantor. In the dim red glow of Suvellus's brazier did Lord Judge stand long gazing silently at the three, then wept but only briefly, then turned with wet cheeks shameless and stood before Suvellus, and said: "These three did you send, wizard, and each of them is dead. Now I think that it is for myself alone to travel as have they, and to succeed where they did fail. Or if I too succeed not, it is as well or better that I die attempting to save Atala, than that I live to lead her to her doom and her degradation."

But Suvellus would have this not, and argued with Lord Judge that Atala must have her leader to the end, for well or ill, but that he, Suvellus, knew of another way to halt the fleet of Cataya, and would himself act to save Atala, did Lord Judge but trust him.

Long had Lord Judge trusted Suvellus. From infancy had he crowed and pulled at tumbling locks and streaming beard of the mage; in childhood had he run from parent and retainer to seek out the wizard and beg of him a charm, a spell: to make a thistle a sweetmeat, to mend a silken robe, to win the love of a pet toad, memorize an unstudied lesson. Now could he not deny the wizard this chance to try his craft once more, in preservation of his land.

Unspeaking, he nodded his as-

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sent. The wizard moved again to cupboard, this time he returned bearing not branches nor leaves, but some object tiny and hidden within his claw-like hands and billowing sleeves. He stood a moment breathing at the brazier, taking the last faint fumes of the old ashes, then raised one hand for a moment, then gestured with the other to Lord Judge.

Almost before Lord Judge could reach his side Suvellus sagged weakly. With feeble signs and faint whispers he indicated to Lord Judge his wish, and was more carried than guided to be laid beside the other three.

Seeing now the four unmoving, the chamber deserted by consciousness except for his troubled self, Lord Judge wearily resumed his seat and stared hopelessly at the glowing brazier.

But Suvellus rose through ceiling, cleft Vulcayan skies, arrowed toward the Middle Continent, feeling might forgotten by his body decades before, feeling full of confidence, of power and speed. He brought up quickly just inland of the straits separating the Middle Continent from Atala, sighted keenly the green and silver fleet approaching through the sky of the Middle Continent.

Seemingly from the southern horizon where Tacans built their jagged pyramids to the sun, to the northern horizon where Roquis paddled boats of bark and hunted through snowy winter, stretched the rows of silver craft and green-glowing lanterns, their trails of emerald and jade stretching westward, westward it seemed almost to their source in distant Cataya.

But Suvellus, halted, raised his mighty head, white mane flying, white beard streaming, spread gigantic arms, crimson-robe whipping in some wind made not of air, planted mighty feet wide, wide apart, where mountains and rivers flowed between those feet.

Onward came the silver barges, rock-steady stood the giant phantom, until Suvellus swept his red-clothed mighty arms forward and inward, stretching incredibly, sweeping mightily, the sounds of crashing hulls and screaming sailors strangely muffled in a shrouding thickness, mighty weapons firing randomly in every direction, but briefly only; and quickly the mighty fleet, serpent and hound, falcon and dragon, was gone from the sky of the Middle Continent.

In Vulca in the domed chamber sat alone Lord Judge. At some sound from behind he rose and walked to the place where had lain each of his men unmoving. Now Lord Judge heard the low moaning and saw the first sluggish movements of slowly returning awareness.

Joyously did he identify Yaotchall, young Dondus, wily Ninantor, but the mage he saw not in the room. ◄

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SCIENCE

THE NOBEL PRIZE THAT WASN'T

by Isaac Asimov

A MONTH AGO, I GAVE A LECTURE at a nearby university, and the evening began with a dinner which deserving students were allowed to attend. Naturally, the attendees were science fiction fans who thought it would be great to meet me, and that suited me fine, because I think it's great to meet people who think it's great to meet me.

One of the students was a buxom eighteen-year-old coed and I found that delightful, because many years ago I took a liking to buxom eighteen-year-old coeds and I've never entirely outgrown that feeling. She sat next to me at the dinner, and I was at my genial and witty best, simply oozing gallantry and charm. Somewhere around the dessert, though, I paused for breath, and, in the silence, the sound of the conversation elsewhere along the table welled up about us.

We both stopped to listen. It was the other collegiates talking; all of them earnest young men and women, deeply involved in the burning issues of the day. To be sure, I was about to give a talk on the burning issues of the day, but, even so, listening to the others made me feel a little ashamed that I had burdened my companion of the meal with nothing more than nonsense. And just as I was beginning to launch into some deep philosophy, she said to me, "Everyone is so serious here. Ever since I came to college I've met only serious people."

She paused to think and then said, with every sign of absolute sincerity, "In fact, in all the time I've been here, you're the first eighteen-year-old I've met."

So I kissed her.

But you know, however youthful I feel and act in consequence of my temperament, my way of life and my constant association with col-

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lege students, I am nevertheless over eighteen. My enemies might even say I was far, *far* beyond eighteen, and they would be right.

Still, there's no way of avoiding the advance of years except by dying, and there's no great fun in that, as I will show you in the case of the young man who will be under discussion this month—

Last month, remember, I talked about the periodic table, and how even after nearly half a century of steady triumphs, it still lacked a firm foundation in the second decade of the twentieth century. It received that foundation, finally, through a twenty-year set of developments that began with something seen out of the corner of the eye.

The year of that beginning was 1895, the place was in the laboratory of Wilhelm Konrad Roentgen, head of the physics department at the University of Würzburg in Bavaria. Roentgen was investigating cathode rays, the big glamor object of physics in those days. An electric current forced through a good enough vacuum emerged as a stream of what turned out to be particles much smaller than atoms (sub-atomic particles), which received the name of "electrons."

These streams of electrons had a host of fascinating properties. For one thing, they produced luminescence when they struck certain chemicals. The luminescence wasn't very bright, so, in order to study it more easily, Roentgen darkened the room and encased the cathode-ray tube in thin black cardboard.

Then, on November 5, 1895, he turned on his cathode-ray tube and prepared to peer close inside the box and proceed with his experiments. Before he could do so, a sparkle of light in the darkness caught his eye. He looked up and there, to one side of the tube, was a piece of paper coated with barium platinocyanide, one of the chemicals that glowed when struck by the fleeting electrons.

What puzzled Roentgen was that the barium platinocyanide didn't happen to be in the path of the electrons. If the paper had been *inside* the cardboard box at the proper end of the cathode-ray tube, why, all right. But the glowing paper was to one side of the tube, and even if one supposed that some of the electrons were leaking sideways, there was no way they could get through the cardboard.

Perhaps the glow was caused by something else altogether and had nothing to do with the cathode-ray tube. Roentgen shut off the electric current, the cathode-ray tube went dead—and the coated paper stopped glowing. He turned the electric current on and off and the coated paper glowed and ceased glowing in exact rhythm. He took the paper into the next room and it glowed (more faintly) only when the cathode-ray tube went into operation.

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Roentgen could only come to one conclusion. The cathode-ray tube was producing some mysterious radiation that was extraordinarily penetrating; that could go through cardboard and even walls. He hadn't the faintest notion of what that radiation might be, so he named it with the symbol of the unknown. He called it "x-rays," and it has kept that name ever since.

Roentgen experimented furiously, and then, after a phenomenally short interval, managed to publish the first paper on the subject on December 28, 1895, reporting all the basic properties of the new radiation. On January 23, 1896, he gave his first public lecture on the phenomenon. He produced x-rays before the excited audience, showed that they would fog a photographic plate and that they would penetrate matter—some types of matter more easily than others.

X-rays would penetrate the soft tissues, for instance, more easily than bone. If a hand were placed on a photographic plate and exposed to x-rays, the bones would block so much of the x-rays that the portion of the plate under them would remain relatively un-fogged. The bones would appear white on black. An aged Swiss physiologist, Rudolf Albert von Kolliker, volunteered, and an x-ray photograph of his hand was taken.

No physical discovery was ever applied to medical science so quickly. The thought that the interior of intact, living organisms could be seen caused intense excitement, and only four days after the news of x-rays reached the United States, the new radiation was successfully used to locate a bullet in a man's leg. Within a year of Roentgen's discovery, a thousand papers on x-rays were published, and in 1901, when the Nobel Prizes were first set up, the very first to be awarded in physics went to Roentgen.

(Laymen went wild, too. Panicky members of the New Jersey legislature tried to push through a law preventing the use of x-rays in opera glasses for the sake of maidenly modesty—which was about par for legislative understanding of science.)

It was clear that the radiation couldn't appear out of nowhere. The speeding electrons making up the cathode rays struck the glass of the tube and were stopped more or less suddenly. The kinetic energy of those speeding electrons had to appear in another form, and they did so as x-rays, which were energetic enough to smash through considerable thicknesses of matter.

If this happened when electrons struck glass, what would happen when they struck something which was denser than glass and could

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stop them more effectively? The greater deceleration ought to produce more energetic x-rays than those Roentgen had first observed. Pieces of metal were therefore sealed into the cathode-ray tubes in places where they would be struck by the electrons. The expected happened. Larger floods of more energetic x-rays were produced.

The x-rays produced by the collision of electrons with metals were studied with particular care in 1911 by the English physicist, Charles Glover Barkla. Physicists had not yet worked up appropriate techniques for measuring the properties of x-rays with real delicacy, but one could at least tell that one particular sheaf of x-rays might penetrate a greater thickness of matter than another sheaf would and that the first therefore contained more energy.

Barkla found that for a given metal, x-rays were produced in sharply different energy-ranges, judging by their penetrating quality. There would be what he called the K-series, the L-series, the M-series and so on, in order of decreasing penetrability and, therefore, decreasing energy content. The energy range was discontinuous. There were no x-rays to speak of at energy levels intermediate between the K and the L or between the L and the M and so on.

What's more, each different metal produced a set of x-rays with energies characteristic of itself. If one focussed on one particular series, the L-series, for instance, these would increase in energy, the higher the atomic weight of the metal that was stopping the electrons.

Since the x-ray energy levels were characteristic of the metal used to stop the electrons, Barkla called them "characteristic x-rays."

The *x* of x-rays remained appropriate for seventeen years after Roentgen's initial discovery.

Were x-rays composed of particles like electrons, but much more energetic? Or were x-rays made up of bundles of electromagnetic waves like those of ordinary light, but much more energetic?

If x-rays consisted of waves, they would be bent in their course by a diffraction grating, one in which there were numerous fine, opaque lines, parallel to each other, on an otherwise transparent screen. The trouble was that the lines in such gratings have to be separated by small distances. The shorter the wavelengths of the radiation being studied, the more closely spaced the diffraction lines must be.

One could rule, by mechanical means, lines fine enough and closely-spaced enough to diffract ordinary light-waves, but if x-rays were like light but much more energetic, their waves would have to be much smaller than those of light. Lines simply could not be ruled close enough to handle x-rays.

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It occurred to a German physicist, Max Theodor Felix von Laue, that one did not have to depend on man-made lines. Crystals consisted of atoms arranged in great regularity. Within the crystal there would be sheets of atoms of one particular kind oriented along one particular plane. There would be successive sheets of these atoms separated by just the distances one would need for diffracting x-rays. A crystal, in other words, was a diffraction grating designed by Nature for use in the study of x-rays (if one wanted to be romantic about it).

Well, then, if x-rays were sent through a crystal and if they were diffracted in a way one could predict from theory, *assuming* the x-rays were light-like waves, then the x-rays very likely *were* light-like waves.

In 1912, von Laue and his associates sent a beam of x-rays through a crystal of zinc sulfide, and it was diffracted just so. The x-rays were electromagnetic radiation then, like light but far more energetic. Now x-rays were no longer *x*, but they kept the name anyway.

Scientists could go further. The distance between sheets of atoms in the crystal could be worked out from data not involving x-rays. From this, one could calculate how much diffraction different wavelengths ought to yield. By passing x-rays through a given crystal of a pure substance, then, and measuring the amount of diffraction (something that was reasonably easy to do) the wavelength of a particular set of x-rays could be determined with surprising precision.

A young Australian student of physics at Cambridge, William Lawrence Bragg, hearing of von Laue's experiment, saw the point at once. His father, who was teaching physics at the University of Leeds, saw the same point. Together, father and son began measuring x-ray wavelengths at a great rate and perfected the technique.

And this brings me to the hero of this article, the English physicist, Henry Gwyn-Jeffreys Moseley, son of a professor of anatomy who died when Henry was only four.

Moseley was simply a streak of brilliance. He won scholarships to both Eton and Oxford and in 1910, when he was 23 years old, he joined the group of young men who were working under the New Zealand-born Ernest Rutherford at Victoria University in Manchester, and stayed with him for two years.

Rutherford was himself one of the great experimenters of all times* and had won the Nobel Prize in 1908. (He won it in chemistry,

I listed him among the ten greatest scientists of all time in THE ISAAC WINNERS (F & SF, July 1963).

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because his physical discoveries had such exciting significance for the science of chemistry—rather to his disgust, for like any good physicist he tended to look down on chemists.)

What's more, seven of those who worked for him at one time or another went on to win Nobel Prizes of their own eventually. Yet there is room to argue that of all those who worked for Rutherford, none was more brilliant than Moseley.

It occurred to Moseley to combine the work of the Braggs and of Barkla. Instead of differentiating among the various characteristic x-rays associated with different metals by Barkla's rather crude criterion of penetrability, he would send them through crystals, a la the Braggs, and measure their wavelengths with precision.

This he did in 1912 (by which time he had shifted to Oxford and to independent research) for the metals calcium, titanium, vanadium, chromium, manganese, iron, cobalt, nickel and copper. These elements make up, in that order, a solid stretch across the periodic table, except that between calcium and titanium, there should be scandium, and Moseley had no scandium available with which to work.

Moseley found a particular series of the characteristic x-rays associated with each metal decreased in wavelength (and therefore increased in energy) as one went up the periodic table and did so in a very regular way. In fact, if you took the square root of the wavelength, the relationship was straight-line.

This was extraordinarily important because the atomic weights which, until then, had been the chief way of judging the order of the elements in the periodic table showed no such great regularity. The atomic weights of the elements studied by Moseley were (to one decimal place): 40.1, 47.9, 50.9, 52.0, 54.9, 55.8, 58.9, 58.7, and 63.5. The atomic weight of scandium, which Moseley did not have available, was 45.0. The atomic weight intervals are, therefore, 4.9, 2.9, 3.0, 1.1, 2.9, 0.9, 3.1, —0.2, 4.8.

These irregular intervals simply could not compare with the absolute regularity of the x-ray wavelengths. What's more, in the periodic table there were occasional places where elements were out of order if the atomic weights were used as criteria. Thus, from their chemical properties, it was certain that nickel came after cobalt in the table, even though nickel's atomic weight was slightly lower than that of cobalt. This *never* happened with x-ray wavelengths. By that criteria, nickel had characteristic x-rays of greater energy than cobalt and *ought* to come after cobalt.

The conclusion Moseley was forced to come to was that the atomic

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weight of an element was not a fundamental characteristic and did not entirely, in and of itself, account for why a particular element was a particular element. The x-ray wavelengths, on the other hand, represented something that *was* a fundamental characteristic of the elements.

Moseley was even able to point out what that something was.

Just one year before, Moseley's old boss, Rutherford, had conducted a series of elegant experiments that had demonstrated the basic principles of atomic structure. The atom was not the featureless, ultimate particle it had been thought to be all through the 19th Century. Instead, it had a complex internal makeup.

Almost all the atomic mass was concentrated in the very center of its structure; in an "atomic nucleus" that took up only a quadrillionth of the volume of the atom. All about it, filling the rest of the atom, were electrons which were mere froth, for one electron had a mass only 1/1837 that of even the lightest atom (that of hydrogen).

Each electron had a unit negative charge which was absolutely identical in size in all electrons (as far as anyone knew then, or, for that matter, now). The electron charge is usually represented as -1.

The atom as a whole, however, was electrically uncharged. It followed therefore that the central atomic nucleus must have a balancing positive charge.

Suppose, then, that each different element was made up of atoms containing a characteristic number of electrons. The central nuclei of these atoms must contain that same characteristic and balancing number of positive unit charges. If an element had atoms containing only one electron, its nucleus would have a charge of $+1$. An atom with two electrons would have a nucleus with a charge of $+2$. One with three electrons a nucleus with a charge of $+3$ and so on.

Electrons in varying numbers can, however, be stripped from or added to particular atoms, leaving those atoms with a net positive or negative charge respectively. This means that the electron-number is not really fundamentally crucial to the nature of the atom. The atomic nucleus, hidden far within the center of the atom, could not be manipulated by ordinary chemical methods, however. It remained a constant factor and it was therefore *the* characteristic property of an element.

In Moseley's time, nobody knew the details of the structure of the atomic nucleus, of course, but that was not yet necessary. The size of the positive charge on the nucleus was enough.

It was easy to argue, for instance, that the speeding electrons of the cathode rays would be decelerated more effectively as the charge

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content of the atom they struck increased. The energy of the x-rays produced would increase in some regular fashion with the increase in charge content; and if the charge content increased very regularly by unit charges, then so would the energy content of the x-rays.

Moseley suggested that each element be represented by a number that would express two different things: 1) the number of unit positive charges on the nuclei of its atoms, and 2) its position in the periodic table.

Thus, hydrogen, as the first element in the table, would be represented by the number 1 and, it was to be hoped, would have 1 unit positive charge on its atomic nucleus. (This turned out to be correct.) Helium would be 2, this representing the fact that it was the second element in the periodic table and had two unit positive charges on the nuclei of its atoms.—And so on all the way to uranium, the last element then known in the periodic table, which would, from the data gathered then and since, have ninety-two unit charges on its atomic nuclei and therefore be represented by the number 92.

Moseley suggested that these numbers be called "atomic numbers" and that suggestion was adopted.

Moseley published his findings in 1913, and it made an enormous splash at once. In Paris, Georges Urbain thought he would test Moseley. He had spent many years carefully and painstakingly separating rare earth minerals, and he prepared a mixture of several oxides which he felt no one but an expert could analyze, and that only after long and tedious fractionations. He brought it to Oxford and there Moseley bounced electrons off the mixture, measured the wavelength of the x-rays produced and in hardly any time at all announced the mixture to contain erbium, thulium, ytterbium, and lutetium—and he was right.

Urbain was astonished, as much by Moseley's youth (he was still only 26) as by the power of his discovery. He went back to Paris, preaching the atomic number concept with fervor.

Now at last the periodic table was on a firm foundation. When the x-ray wavelengths differed by a certain known minimum amount, then two elements were adjacent and had nuclear charges that differed by a single unit. There could be *no new elements located between them.*

This meant that from hydrogen to uranium inclusive, there were exactly 92 conceivable elements, no more and no less. And in the half century since Moseley's discovery no unexpected elements in the hydrogen-uranium range have shown up between two elements predicted adjacent by x-ray data. To be sure, new elements were located

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beyond uranium, with atomic numbers of 93, 94, and so on, up to (at present writing) 104 and *possibly* 105, but that is a different story.

Furthermore, if the x-ray wavelengths of two elements differed by twice the expected interval, then there *was* an element in between, exactly *one* element. If no such element was known, then it remained to be discovered, that was all.

At the time the atomic number concept was advanced, eighty-five elements were known in the range from hydrogen to uranium. Since there was room for ninety-two elements it meant that there still remained exactly seven undiscovered elements. What's more, their atomic numbers turned out to be 43, 61, 72, 75, 85, 87, and 91.

This solved the problem posed last month concerning the total number of rare earths. It turned out there was only one rare earth not yet discovered, and it was located in number 61, between neodymium (60) and samarium (62). It took over thirty years to discover these missing elements, and as it happened, the very last to be discovered was the rare earth, 61. It was discovered in 1948 and named promethium. (By that time, though, elements beyond uranium were being discovered.)

Thanks to Moseley's atomic number concept, the foundation of the periodic table was made firm as rock. Every discovery since then has served only to strengthen both the atomic number and the periodic table.

Clearly, Moseley deserved the Nobel Prize in either physics or chemistry (toss a coin and take your pick, and I could argue that he deserved one of each), and it was just as certain as anything could be in such matters that he was going to get it.

In 1914 the physics prize went to von Laue and in 1915 to the father-son combination of the Braggs. In both cases the work on x-rays had served as preliminaries to the culminating work of Moseley. In 1916, then, Moseley would have *had* to get it; there was no way of avoiding it.

I'm sorry; there *was* a way of avoiding it.

In 1914, World War I broke out, and Moseley enlisted at once as a lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. That was his choice, and he is to be respected for his patriotism. Still, just because an individual is patriotic and wishes to risk a life that is not entirely his own to throw away, doesn't mean that the decision-makers of a government have to go along with it.

In other words, Moseley might have volunteered a thousand times,

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and yet the government had no business sending him to the front. Rutherford understood this and tried to have Moseley assigned to scientific labors, since it was obvious that he could be far more valuable to the nation and the war effort in the laboratory than in the field. By World War II this was understood, and Moseley would have been protected as a rare and valuable war resource.

No such thing was to be expected in the monumental stupidity that was called World War I.

In the spring of 1915, the British got the idea of landing at Gallipoli in western Turkey to seize control of the narrow straits linking the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Forcing a passage through, they could open a supply route to the tottering Russian armies, which combined enormous individual bravery with equally enormous administrative ineptitude. Strategically, the concept was a good one, but tactically it was handled with incredible folly. Even in a war so consistently idiotic, the Gallipoli campaign manages to shine as an archetype of everything that should not be done.

By January 1916, it was all over. The British had thrown in half a million men and gotten nowhere. Half of them were casualties.

In the course of this miserable campaign, Moseley was tapped. On June 13, 1915, he embarked for Gallipoli. On August 10, 1915, while he was telephoning an order, a Turkish bullet found its mark. He was shot through the head and killed at once. He had not yet reached his 28th birthday, and in my opinion, his death was the most expensive individual loss to the human race generally, among all the millions who died in that war.

When the time for the 1916 Nobel Prize in physics came about, there was no award. It is easy to explain that by saying that the war was on, but there had been an award in 1915 and there was to be one in 1917. The 1917 one was to Barkla, still another man whose work was only preliminary to the great breakthrough of Moseley's.

Call me sentimental, but I see no reason why the colossal stupidity of the human race should force the indefinite perpetration of a disgraceful injustice. It is not too late, even now, for the community of science to fill that gap and to state that the 1916 Nobel Prize in physics (that wasn't), belongs to Moseley, and that he ought to appear in every list of Nobel laureates published.

We don't owe it to him; I'm not *that* sentimental. He is beyond either debt or repayment. We owe it to the good name of science. ◄

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Raylyn Moore has a couple of novels to her credit; she is the wife of sf author Ward Moore. Her first story for F&SF—the first of many, we hope—is a strong fantasy about a chillingly different ménage à trois.

They All Ran After The Farmer's Wife

by Raylyn Moore

STRONGER WINDS DON'T OFTEN blow than the gale over the Kansas plain that early spring afternoon when Clay Justus, not being able to hitch a ride, walked twelve miles out to the Simeon Turnage place to see about a job.

Fellow in town had told him, "You lookin' for work you oughta see old Turnage. Out the Waterloo Pike. Big spread. Name written in letters three inches high on one of them doghouse-size mailboxes painted yellow. Can't miss it." But then the fellow had noticed Clay's hands. "Sure it's field work you're after, son?"

Clay shrugged. "A man's got to do something. Back in Indiana I was a preacher. Church went broke."

"Tell you what," the fellow had advised. "Ordinarily I'd say don't mention that around, about the preachin'. All the trouble Simeon Turnage's had keepin' his help, though, I suppose he'd just about hire anybody. Acrobats or them astronauts, all the same to him."

"How do you mean trouble?"

"Nothin'. Forget it. Just talk anyhow."

"I hope so. I don't want any trouble."

"Just keep your hand on the tractor wheel and your eye on the furrow, son, you won't have no trouble. Nobody ever hung for mindin' his own business."

" 'I go about my Father's business'," Clay had replied.

And at that the fellow had looked him over again, head to boots, and finally nodded ap-

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provingly. "Matter of fact, now I think of it, Simeon's a religious sort himself. A Bible-quotin' man might be just the thing to change old Turnage's luck."

So here he was, walking up the Turnage lane, the steady wind pasting his blue workshirt to his ribs and his pantlegs to his lean thighs. He'd seen no car, truck, man, or mule for the whole dozen miles, nothing traveling the road but a few worn-down, mildewed tumbleweeds harried endlessly along with no sure destination, like Clay himself until now.

House looked prosperous enough. Storm windows. TV aerial. Big air-conditioner for summer humping out a side window. Something that must be a bunkhouse between house and silo, with a smaller aerial and conditioner on that too. His future home maybe. No flowers anywhere about, though; it was too early in the season for annuals, but there weren't even rosebushes or shrubs. All business. Turnage must be a bachelor.

The only sound as he approached had been the scree-eep, scree-eep of the windmill, so it was good finally to hear a voice when he got there. "Howdy, stranger."

"Howdy," Clay returned pleasantly.

"Right this way, please."

Clay couldn't see anyone behind the screen of the back porch. "Can't get in, sir. Screen door's hooked, I believe."

"Sorry. Better luck next time. Come back in two weeks."

Clay set down the beat-up canvas bag that held his shaving stuff, his Bible, and the picture of his mother. He made blinders of his palms against the screen, and when he saw what was inside, he smiled. The voice had come from one of those black mynah birds perched on a fancy white wrought-iron settee on the porch.

"All right, you fooled me, you flunky for the devil. But listen, isn't anybody else home? Hate to waste my breath unless I get some sense for my trouble."

He rapped hard on the door and the mynah said, "Help! Help! Get your cottonpickin' hands off me, you bloody Kaffir!"

But the girl was already standing in the inside doorway. Clay removed his worn-out felt hat with the curled-up side edges. "Hello, ma'am. Like to talk with Mr. Simeon Turnage if he's about."

"I'm Bep Turnage." She walked over and unhooked the door. "He's in to Waterloo on an errand. Home any minute. Come in and wait, why don't you?"

She was about the ugliest female Clay had ever set eyes on, though when he tried to put her faults into words in his mind, the words didn't add up to ugliness, but just the opposite. Red hair,

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deep-green eyes, turned-up nose, wide mouth, freckles. The trouble was in the arrangement, he decided finally. The green eyes were too small and close together, the turned-up nose too prominent, the freckles too thick, almost blotchy. Even the red hair, while there was plenty of it, was crisp and fiery instead of soft and wavy; it crinkled instead of curled. Little mole over her left eyebrow that on another girl would have been a beauty spot, on her was a plain ordinary wart.

All this time he'd been looking at how ugly she was, they'd been exchanging pleasantries. He said how he'd never felt a brisker wind except in front of a bad storm, and she smiled as if that were a compliment she could take the credit for and told him it often blew like that out here. Then they spoke some more about different kinds of bad weather they'd both seen, but all the while Clay was thinking how old man Turnage was going to have the very devil of a time getting this Bep married off unless she was a whale of a cook and her father could find her a near-sighted bridegroom.

"I hope you've come about the job," she said then. "We've been real desperate for another hand. It's already late in the season to plow, but it's not done yet for lack of help and a streak of bad fortune. Reason for the trip down to Waterloo just now was to pick up a part for the tractor that broke down today."

"Sounds bad for your father, good for me," Clay said. "I could sure use the job."

He couldn't really see how Bep was shaped below the neck because of her loose, funny-looking dress, made like those the missionaries used to put on the heathen. Still, her legs were not too bad, he decided, though nothing like the long, smooth ones on the calendars a person couldn't help seeing in garages and feed stores.

"You don't seem much like a field worker," she told him. "Too thin, and your hands are soft and nice." The green eyes lingered over Clay's hands.

"I'm used to hard work, though. Born and raised on a farm."

"It's a mighty hard life here. There's only one other hired man. Permanent fellow, been around long as I can remember. He mostly looks after the stock. Still, I sure hope you decide to stay."

"You'll be sorry," the mynah squawked right in Clay's ear, though Clay had taken the precaution of choosing a chair clear across the porch from the one the bird had been perched on. Danged varmint had sneaked up on him when he wasn't watching.

"Oh, you just better shut up, Holt," Bep said, and laughed. It was an awkward laugh, the kind to go with an ugly girl. "Don't mind him," she told Clay, and

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then added as a sort of afterthought, "Simeon Turnage is not my father, he's my husband."

For some reason it seemed a good thing to Clay that right at that moment a dusty Cadillac roared up the lane and came to a gravelly stop just outside the back porch where he and Bep were sitting. Simeon Turnage was as broad and sturdy as a general-store safe, but his grizzled, day-old beard covered a round, apple-cheeked face set with sharp blue eyes. It was as if he had grown from a strong, hard-working young farm boy into a strong, hard-working old wheat farmer with no stage between.

But at sight of Clay's own narrow frame—he'd been downright undernourished for the last six months of trying to hold that poverty-dogged little Indiana congregation together—Simeon seemed more dubious than any of them so far. "Don't know why the wind didn't already blow you over flat," he said. "I'd sure like to hire you on and put you out to work in the next ten minutes, I'm that hard pressed, but—"

Quickly Clay reminded Simeon that David, a stripling, had slain the Philistine giant.

It was something to see how fast old Turnage brightened up. "You a Scripture-readin' man?" And right away Clay had the job.

"Salvation is the hope of this world and the glory of the next," Simeon said as he and Clay set out in the Cadillac over a lumpy dirt field lane to look at the busted tractor. The repair part bounced on the seat between them. Clay nodded. "Lead an upright life, and you can't go wrong," added Simeon.

"I try," said Clay.

"Don't traffic with spirits and tobacco. 'Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging'."

"I don't crave either," Clay answered truthfully.

"Gambling. Keeping late hours and loose company."

"Don't have any card sense. But I do like to read late at night. Something interests me, I go to a library and take out a book or two on it. And Jesus himself resorted with publicans and sinners."

"Don't apply to mortal man," decided Turnage.

"How can you save sinners if you don't talk to them?"

"Live beyond reproach. Save by example. Don't have any truck with women, for a start."

"But marriage—"

"—is for the begetting of children to raise up in the service of the Lord. A man finds out his wife's barren, he should leave her be or let her go. Any other way is harlotry."

"Don't know as I'd go that far—"

"To look at a woman is to lust after her. To touch her except for increase jeopardizes a man's immortal soul."

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In answer Clay merely grunted noncommittally, feeling he could hardly go on arguing with authority about women with his own experience of them being so limited. Not that he hadn't had plenty of temptations of the flesh, dating all the way back before he was fourteen and had followed Aura Lou Ross into the woods at the edge of the tobacco field where they'd been setting plants on his first real job back in Kentucky. Later, when he was twenty-one and just out of Bible college and beginning his vocation, the girls had come flocking thicker than ever. But by that time any looking at them had been confined so far as possible to a systematic search for a suitable helpmeet, the woman he could settle down with at last. Never had found her though, and now he was already in his twenty-sixth year with a lot of troublous living behind him. Maybe he'd been too much of a rolling stone.

By evening of that first day at Turnages', Clay knew how hard the job would be (back-breaking, bone-jarring) and whom he'd have for company in the bunkhouse through the long spring evenings. Fellow name of Aza Hewitt. Not overly friendly, not unfriendly either. Hard to say how old, partly because he was a dark man of the ageless kind; Mexican, possibly Plains Indian, most likely a mixture of several things. Walked with a slight limp.

"Oh, Lord, who maketh the rain to fall and the seed to swell, who causeth the sun to smile on the crops and giveth the harvest strength, bless this bread we are about to eat," Simeon said over supper. Clay was about to lift his fork when Simeon said, "—so that we may be strong in Thy service. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, bringer of all good, our very present help in time of trouble—" Not meaning to, Clay let his mind wander. He noticed how Bep had managed to stay in the kitchen fiddling with the steaming pots while her husband said the blessing. Aza hadn't come into the house at all, though his place was set. "—brother of man, prince of peace, Lamb of Calvary. Amen."

"Amen," Clay echoed and again turned his attention to his salad just as Aza came limping to the table and Bep appeared with the steak. Looked as if the food would be great at the Turnage table, even though Clay soon enough discovered that Mrs. Turnage cooked everything without salt, didn't even put salt in the shaker; Clay had to ask for it. And evidently Simeon had a way of using up all his conversation on God, with none left over for the people around him. The wheat farmer ate silently and steadily, gaze fastened on the blue flowers emerging on his plate as he cleaned it doggedly, hayforking in

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mouthfuls of potatoes and string-beans.

Aza was silent too, so only Bep and Clay talked. Poor thing, Clay thought, stuck out in the middle of wheat country with nothing to do but teach her fool bird to make wisecracks; no wonder she was lonely, and the least he could do was be friendly. She had got herself rigged out in blue-green gingham, a dress not quite so shapeless as the first he'd seen her in. It did nothing much for her homeliness, he thought, but then there are some things only a miracle can change.

"Clay—you don't mind if I call you Clay?—you got folks back where you came from?"

"No one since my mother passed away a few years ago."

She sighed. "Maybe you'll stay around a while then, if you've nobody to hurry back to?"

"I'd like to, Mrs. Turnage."

"You must always call me Bep. Always." She smiled at Clay. Simeon finished his second, maybe third, helping of steak and began on his first helping of pie.

Because he had considered and then rejected the notion of telling her how pretty she looked in the dress—he was not a liar—Clay thought now of something else that might please her. "Bep is a real nice name. What kind of name is it?"

"An old-fashioned kind. For Hepzibah."

It was good, he reflected both then and later, with the world filling up so fast with Gigis and Zsa-Zsas, to meet a woman with an old-fashioned name.

And that night in the bunkhouse, he had the first of what was to become a long series of puzzling conversations with Aza. "A man can make it big," his new roommate confided to Clay without preliminaries, "if he's not so foolish as to care too much what he does."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Clay admitted.

Aza looked Clay over narrowly, seeming to be trying to make up his mind whether or not to spell out some secret, but finally all he said was, "I only meant that the young ones like yourself can get ahead if they're of a mind to, without breakin' their back in somebody else's fields. I knew a fellow just your age, drifter like yourself, never any real money, went to Arkansas and started up his own business goin' from one poultry farm to another as a chicken de-sexer. Caponizer, some call them. Easy work, no investment, not even any tools—all you need is to grow one real long fingernail and keep it filed sharp. He made a fortune."

"I don't think I'd care for that kind of work," said Clay. "Thanks just the same for the suggestion. You aren't by any chance wanting to get rid of me, are you?" But

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Aza didn't say whether he was or not.

A little later when Clay tried to sleep, thinking he'd drop right off after his workout in the Turnage wheat fields, he tossed for a couple of hours, bothered by powerful thoughts of Bep and her ugliness. And though the bunkhouse appeared to have been newly screened, a passel of early mosquitoes must have got in during the night, for by morning his skin was bleeding in a number of places.

But then, after that first day, time seemed to get stuck. The long stretches when he sat the tractor from early morning till noon without a break, racing with the weather to finish the plowing, seemed like weeks. The weeks seemed like years. Where before he had only guessed at the loneliness and boredom of Bep's life, now he was experiencing these things firsthand and feeling an even deeper sympathy for her. There was nothing to do on the farm but work, and unless you had an errand at the store, the grain elevator, or the implement dealer's, nothing to do in Waterloo either.

Walking the village's few streets on one of his visits, Clay did finally discover a dinky public library in the converted parlor of a retired schoolteacher, and when he couldn't find much on the shelves to interest him, the teacher-librarian offered to send off for what he wanted to the state library. Sometimes took three or four weeks, she warned. In the evenings Aza, except for his occasional strange remarks, remained about as talkative as a barber pole; the television in the bunkhouse was out of commission (not that Clay cared for it anyhow), and there seemed nothing around to read till his library books arrived but Clay's own Bible and some old copies of the *Wheat Growers' Gazette*. Through the day Simeon too was silent unless moved to express some point of Christian doctrine on which he wanted Clay's opinion.

Before long it had all added up in Clay's mind to the reason why, when he closed his eyes at nights now and Bep appeared to him, she had begun to look better and better. Maybe any female would have begun to look good. Or maybe he'd made a wrong judgment in the first place about the bottle-green eyes and the rich harvest of red hair.

He thought of leaving immediately, even considered asking Aza for some more of his suggestions about what a young man could do if he wasn't particular, but Clay knew for a fact that no other hands had shown up to apply for a job on the Turnage farm, and he didn't have it in him to desert Simeon in midseason after he had committed himself by

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asking for work in the first place.

"Lead us not into temptation," Clay prayed fervently, but not for the first time in his life, of course. It only increased his discomfort that his present fix called up memories of similar situations in the recent past. The time he'd lusted after the girl with the violet eyes who sang alto in the choir. The bad days and nights he'd put in over the deacon's widow who had kept insisting Clay drop around to console her. The black-haired girl with the apricot complexion behind the lunch counter, seen only once but never forgotten.

Though he never stopped wrestling with his conscience and his better judgment, Clay was not a man to deceive even himself. He knew from the first that this might well be the one he wouldn't win.

"Help me to overcome; enlighten me. Allow me to see in their true light the weaknesses of the flesh, these lapses from the right way," he was saying in his mind the very moment he found himself holding Bep in his arms on one of the twilight visits she'd taken to paying to the bunkhouse. How had it happened anyway? They had been sitting, quietly talking on the outside steps, and now they were, unaccountably, inside standing by Clay's bed. For a cowardly instant Clay thought the brooding presence of Aza Hewitt might yet save him, or rather save both himself and Bep, for he felt the heavy weight of responsibility for Bep's immortal soul too. But Hewitt was nowhere around.

Nowhere, that is, except in Clay's now wildly disordered imagination which kept picturing Aza—or even Simeon, who in fact never came near the bunkhouse—opening the door in the crucial moments of their hungry coupling on top of Clay's neatly stretched blanket. It made the occasion something less than it might have been, and Bep must have thought so too, because even before she had recovered her breath and smoothed down her flyaway hair, she murmured, "Tomorrow night better meet me in the barn loft. Ten o'clock." And then she was gone.

He lay quiet for a while more, thinking hard, arriving before long at an obvious conclusion: it would be no use trying to fight his way back onto the straight, narrow way, of trying to undo his undoing. For Clay knew that even his prayers would now be composed of mere words unsupported even by good intentions; a courting of hypocrisy, itself a deadly sin.

But as happens in these cases, the compensations of Clay's original sin were enormous. After that first evening, all day every day, sweating under the Kansas sun or buffeted by the now-familiar Kan-

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sas wind, Clay had something to think about, to look forward to. Old Simeon had to call out sometimes two, three times to get Clay's attention when some Biblical point came to mind.

Not that things were easy. Clay worried more or less constantly about someone finding out, and in the bunkhouse one night Aza startled him nearly out of his skin by seeming to know exactly what was on Clay's mind, though it might have been just a coincidence. "Seems to me it all comes down to the fact," Aza said in his abrupt way, "that what looks bad and what good is according to where you're standing to do the looking and where the light comes from to see it by."

"Yes," Clay said, recovering himself. "That's relativism. One of the age-old arguments against religion."

"Call it by any fancy name you like. I was never one for churches and praying, not like Simeon, though I been in many a church and heard many a prayer. It happens though that the idea I just told you I made up myself, out of my own head."

"It's one way of doing," Clay admitted uncertainly. "Though the Testament warns 'that ye go not about after your own heart and your own eyes'."

Up until then, Clay had been thinking that Aza was not a bad sort. He did have his peculiar habits, like never taking off his socks. Been wearing the same pair for a month, even to bed, but of course there was that limp he had. He might merely be sensitive about uncovering a clubfoot. On the other hand—

Next time Clay went into Waterloo he asked the librarian to order him a few more books. She looked a little surprised when she saw the titles he'd written down, but whatever she was thinking she kept to herself.

Out in the fields the wheat grew high and turned into a green ocean. And the work went on, but with interruptions. Seemed old Simeon, for all his upright living, was still laboring in a regular swamp of bad luck. The rain, which had held off till almost too late, finally came down in such quantities that the crop was threatened with ruin. Many more things than the tractor broke down and then broke down again as soon as they were fixed. When the Cadillac wasn't busted, the pickup was. And so on. Simeon himself was laid up with a stomach complaint three different times right at the height of things. When this happened, no doctor would be called, but Bep would scurry around brewing up home remedies that smelled to Clay as if they'd take the hide off a steer.

One of these times when Simeon was feeling poorly, he sent for Clay. The old man beckoned his

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hired man close to the poster bed where he lay swathed in quilts though it was a hot day. He spoke in a raspy whisper. "Anythin' happens to me and somethin' comes up you can't handle, go tell the priest."

Clay was shocked. "The police?"

"The *priest*. At the little Catholic chapel in Waterloo. Ordinarily I don't hold with papists, but the Methodists ain't got the machinery to deal with the problem, though John Wesley himself was a great believer in them things."

Clay was still shocked. "What things?"

"You and me, we don't always see eye to eye. I don't care for habits of the flesh, never did. She's been nothin' but bad for me with her woman's wiles and her dark ways. My marrin' her was all a mistake in the first place. I needed a housekeeper and she'd advertised in a lonely hearts magazine that she was a fine cook lookin' for a home with a 'man of means.' I answered her ad, and one thing led to another. I've said ever since the best thing could happen to me'd be for her to leave my roof and take her sins with her. Desire. Tricks of the devil. Earthly lust. They all want her but not a man of them ever wants to keep her. Afraid."

Clay felt a curious chill dancing across the sun-warmed skin under his shirt, felt himself impaled for a long moment on the sharp blue gaze of Simeon's feverish eye. But two days later the old man was well and working as usual, harder than Clay and Aza together. And no reference to the conversation in the sickroom was ever made.

Summer wore on toward autumn. The wheat fell, acre by acre, under the reaper. On balmy nights in the hayloft, moonlight coursing through the mow door onto Bep's fair skin and radiant hair, Clay would wonder how he could ever have thought she was ugly. Even the dark mole now seemed captivatingly well placed. So did similar beauty spots just under her right breast and above her left hip. In a teasing mood, he kissed them one by one and cursed his ignorance for ever imagining that those shapeless dresses of Bep's were worn to hide shapelessness of another kind. More likely the dresses were mail-ordered by Simeon, his idea of suitable garb for a woman, any woman, especially one as beautiful as Bep.

In the fields Simeon himself said, "A depraved man and a righteous one, each gets what he deserves either in this world or the next. If there's one sure thing, it's that Judgment Day will come."

To which Clay muttered, "'—though now we see through a glass darkly'."

In the bunkhouse Aza said, "Cheer up. We need good and evil to balance up the world."

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"Dualism," declared Clay suspiciously. "Another argument of the devil."

"Call it any fancy name you like. I know what I know."

In the barn Bep said, "Don't ever leave me, Clay."

And Clay, still no liar whatever else he had become, had to tell her, even though they'd been about to make love and it might spoil everything: "But surely you must know we can't go on like this very much longer. When fall comes, and Simeon doesn't need me any more—"

She had been lying relaxed against a loosened bale of straw. Now she shot up like a buggy spring. "So," she hollered, "you're like all the rest of them after all. Already talkin' about leavin' when fall comes. That's when they always go, if not before."

Her words hung in the air. It was Clay's turn to spring up in anger. "Who?" he demanded. "All the rest of who?"

"The hands, of course. The men Simeon hires. They try to go back to wherever they came from and leave me all alone again. It isn't fair. They chase me all spring, and then by summer they're already tryin' to get away. Not that they ever want to take me with them. But I fix them," she said wildly, raging. "I fix them so they're never the same again. Then they don't wait till fall, just run away fast as they can get, scared out of their boots."

"How?" Clay demanded, both sickened and curious. "How do you 'fix' them?"

She smiled the smile of a temptress, lying back again on the straw. It was an evil smile, untrustworthy. If he hadn't been blinded and deafened by lust, he would have seen it before. Clay's head swam and the anger and shame still threatened to devour his gut, but he was drawn to her, marvelously drawn, more than ever, helpless. "I'll show you," she offered. "Go on. Let's you and me make love, Clay. That's what we came here to do, isn't it?"

Unwilling, and yet unable to stop himself, he sank into the straw with her, looked into her green eyes where he discovered the reflection of a whole sea—real water or only wheat waving in the wind, he couldn't tell which; all he knew was that he must subdue that roiling tide. He took her roughly, kissed her wide mouth, folded her close as he had all the other times, and only then knew there was something terribly wrong. He threw himself on her now like an animal, which was ordinarily not his style; she struggled against him, fierce as a cornered vixen, but he couldn't manage a thing. She laughed, long and hard. Strange. From Aura Lou Ross on, he'd had no trouble like this. Any trouble had come from the opposite extreme.

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Impotence was for old men and eunuchs.

Then finally, as they wrestled there in the straw, he loath to admit her power, she loath to let him go until he did, things began to come to him out of the books he had been reading late at night to try to clear up the mystery about Aza. Could it be that the books might explain Bep too? Maybe even explain what Simeon had said in his delirium? Words from the books came to mind. "Ligature," was one. "Did you tie knots in your handkerchief for this, or do you do it another way?"

She looked blank.

"Let me see it then. Your handkerchief. Where is it?"

She paled so that in the shine of the moon her freckles stood out. But that could have been because he was scaring her with his talk. "Turn loose of me, Clay Justus. I think you've gone plumb crazy."

But turn loose is what he wouldn't do. Not yet. A night wind had sprung up outside, sending tattered purple clouds scudding across the moon. In one lower corner of the big hay door he could make out the small hunched-up form of Holt, Bep's silly pet bird, even though, after their first few meetings in the loft, Clay had complained about having Holt on hand, and Bep had promised to see that he was locked in the house nights. At least the bird was keeping his fool mouth shut. "I figured out," Clay said, panting, "who Aza is, and why he never takes off his socks. Has a cloven hoof, I'll bet. But I never dreamed till now you and he were from the same place, so to speak."

"I haven't the faintes notion what you're talkin' about."

"Jesus," Clay said suddenly. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." Bep seemed to wilt, shrinking into a heap against the straw. For good measure he added, "Jesus H. Christ!"

"Don't swear," she urged softly. The wind had died as soon as Bep collapsed. The barn contained only silence now, and Bep's troubled breathing. Even Holt had flown off.

Clay had been prepared to go on, quote a little Scripture, sing a gospel hymn. But more of a good thing wasn't necessary. Things had come right again for him. Afterward, she lay in his arms and it was like any other time on the surface of things, though of course they both knew the truth now.

That night in the bunkhouse, and for several nights to follow, Clay lay in his bed puzzling everything through all over again. He had expected to feel sick and miserable. After all, he had been prepared to think of himself as the sinful lover of another man's wife, but not as the lover of the Whore of Babylon. Odd thing was, he didn't feel so bad as he'd

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expected, didn't really feel bad at all. The hovering cloud of doom just didn't settle. A little while passed and Clay had further figured out that he had been expecting to feel miserable over Bep's former lovers because his own former self would have felt miserable. If he had known all about Bep right off, he would really have run, obligation to Simeon or not, packed the canvas bag and taken off down the lane never looking back. But he was a different man now, no doubt of that. And he had found out not only that Bep was the Whore of Babylon, she was a witch besides.

Yet even this detail didn't really jar him. It was a kind of satisfaction that he could say the word right out to himself and never turn a hair.

"When did you know?" she asked him the next night in the hay. He was pleased to find she was going to be honest with him after all.

"I didn't really know," he said, "although I should have suspected as long ago as early May, when I saw you go off in the Cadillac after we'd been in the barn. You didn't come back until almost dawn. I went nearly wild with wondering, but at the time I trusted you and told myself it was none of my business. I didn't even ask you about it, if you'll recall. Aza was gone at the same time. It was Walpurgis Night, I found out later from one of my library books."

"I could change," she offered. "If you took me with you when you leave, I could learn to be as good a minister's wife as any. Please, Clay?"

"Maybe even better than some," he mused. "I'd never thought of it that way."

In the bunkhouse Aza said, "My business here is over. I'll leave too, when fall comes. Only thing is, I want to be sure you have everything straight. You're the only man's ever really had the chance to take her off Simeon's back because you're the only one ever been able to outdo her tricks. On the other hand, only thing gives you the power to do that is your cleaving to righteous ways. You're an honest man. I knew it from the first, and knew you'd never do business with me. I guess so long as you stay that way, you'll manage to stay ahead of her; just don't forget how the victor eventually takes on the character of the vanquished. Look how many people in this country and England drive Volkswagens since the Second World War."

"I'm not sure I get you," Clay said.

"Anyway," Aza said, seeming not to have heard, "a fellow can lose the world and all his stake in it by sittin' around too long figurin' what's wrong and what's right and where he stands. Those're

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questions that'll never come clear, not to mortal man. Seems like if I was a young fellow with autumn about come and my wages paid and a girl waitin', I'd take her and go, and let the chips fall."

And in the end, that's what Clay did.

Coming soon

If you've read this month's feature story, "Ill Met In Lankhmar," you'll be pleased to know that **Fritz Leiber** has provided us with a sequel, a novelet that will be along shortly. Next month will feature a new **Frank Herbert** novelet, a story that takes off from the same premise as Poul Anderson's "The Fatal Fullfillment" (March 1970) and goes in a very different, but no less engrossing direction. New stories by **G. C. Edmondson, Barry Malzberg, Sidney Lanier** and **Ron Goulart** will also be along soon, as well as a two part novel —and an extraordinary one—by **Thomas Burnett Swann** (remember "The Manor of Roses"?).

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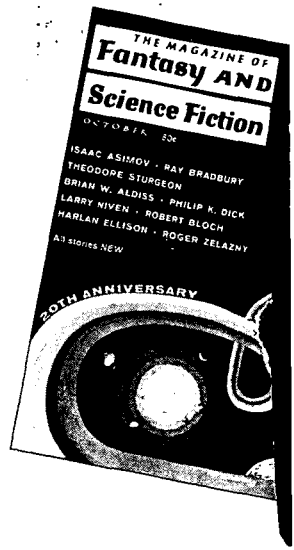

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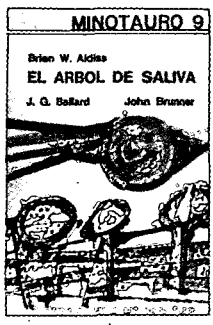

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